

HORROR FILMS OF THE 1990s



JOHN KENNETH MUIR

Horror Films of the 1990s

ALSO BY JOHN KENNETH MUIR
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On the cover: Heather Donahue from the 1999 film
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Lovingly to Mom and Dad, my son Joel, and my beautiful and patient wife Kathryn, who all put up with me as I watched and reviewed hundreds of 1990s horror films.

And also, with love, for Frank "Doc" Leftwich, who passed away as this text was in preparation. I watched more than a hundred horror films with Doc during the 1990s at his home in Richmond, Virginia, and will always cherish the fellowship and laughs we shared during those years.

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Disturbing Behavior .
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Preface

To resurrect an ad-line from the 1990s slasher sequel *Halloween VI: The Curse of Michael Myers* (1995): "Terror never rests in peace."

In that spirit of restlessness, I return to you with this volume, my third "horror decade survey." Quite naturally, the book you now hold in your hands, *Horror Films of the 1990s*, follows the award-winning *Horror Films of the 1970s* (2002) and *Horror Films of the 1980s* (2007).

The reader will discover approximately three hundred scary movies from the Clinton Decade discussed within these pages, as well as a history section that considers the various trends in the genre. As was the case in the two previous books, the films included herein are dated by the year of the *American theatrical or direct-to-video* release, not necessarily the year of copyright or production.

This organization differentiates these books from the useful and immensely popular Internet Movie Database, which lists films by their copyright date. Why take such a tack? Simply, the initial movie-going experience forges indelible memories, and audience members tend to remember the occasion, date and season during which they first experience a film. They recall a summer movie in the summer ... not six or nine months previous to their first encounter with it. For instance, *Warlock* was made in 1989 but not released until 1991. Those who saw the film theatrically thus associate it with the 1990s, even though it was made earlier.

Horror Films of the 1990s highlights horror films released theatrically and "direct-to-video" (on the secondary market of VHS, then, ultimately DVD) from the year 1990 through the year 1999. Right up to Y2K.

Representative films from Italy, New Zealand, Japan and other nations are included throughout the text too. But as before, the book focuses primarily on American movies. Made-for-TV films or so-called TV movies such as *Quicksilver Highway* (1997), *John Carpenter Presents*

Body Bags (1993) or *Full Eclipse* (1993) are not within the purview of this text, alas, and are not included.

The films are organized by alphabetical order within each year, and all entries follow the same formula pioneered by *Horror Films of the 1970s*, so that all three books may be viewed as companion pieces; pieces of a larger whole, which provide a sweeping history of horror films in the last, intriguing decades of the 20th century.

The "critical reception" of each horror film is given through a sampling of reviews, or "blurbs." Some come from the era of release; some are modern re-assessments. To grant a fuller sense of how a movie is perceived and rated overall, I have again invited a number of distinguished guest reviewers to submit short, capsule reviews for the horror films of the age. My guest reviews for *Horror Films of the 1990s* include the following talents.

John Bowen is a regular contributor and columnist in the impressive and popular horror magazine, *Rue Morgue*—considered tops in the industry in 2011—and one of the wittiest people and writers I've had the good fortune to encounter during my writing career.

William Latham is the author of *Mary's Monster* (Powys Media, 1999), a modern take on the Frankenstein myth, and the author of several officially licensed *Space: 1999* books, including *Resurrection*, *Alpha* and *Omega*. Bill also contributed to *Horror Films of the 1970s* and *Horror Films of the 1980s* and boasts a love and admiration for the genre.

Joseph Maddrey is a former producer on the Discovery Channel series, *A Haunting* (2005–2007), and the author of the acclaimed scholarly monograph, *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film* (McFarland, 2004). In 2008, Joe wrote and produced a documentary with the same title narrated by Lance Henriksen and featuring commentary from John Carpenter, Larry Cohen, Joe Dante, George Romero, Mick Garris, and yours truly. Joe also contributed to *Horror Films of the 1980s*.

John W. Morehead is a lifelong fan of the fantastic in pop culture. He is also an academic focusing on cultural studies. These interests collide in his fascinating blog, *TheoFantastique*

(www.theofantastique.com). John is also a contributor to *Cinefantastique Online*, and has an essay in *Butcher Knives & Body Counts* on the slasher as a modern expression of the ancient chaos monster myth.

Brian Solomon, or B-Sol, as he is known affectionately in the blogosphere, is the creator and head-writer of one of the best horror-themed blogs on the net, *Vault of Horror* (<http://thevaultofhorror.blogspot.com>). He is the creative impetus behind the yearly Cyber Horror Awards and also the organizing force behind the famous "Cyber-Elite" horror posts as well.

After the critical reception, the next portion of each entry is "the nuts and bolts" data—"Cast and Crew," which lists the film's personnel behind the scenes and in front of the camera, and other info like the film's MPAA rating and running time.

The synopsis consists of a brief recounting of the film's plot, and readers will detect something new: the synopsis section is much shorter here than either in *Horror Films of the 1970s* or *1980s*. In this age of easy access, it isn't necessary to cover each plot in excessive detail.

The commentary section is my analysis of the film under the spotlight. All of the films are also rated in the traditional "four star" system. To break this down succinctly: one star means the movie is poor. (A plain "." means it's not even that good.) Two stars means the movie is fair. Three stars means good. And a four star movie is a great one. The dividing line, then, is the two-and-a-half star film; a movie that hovers somewhere between average or fair, and good. In the 1990s, there are quite a few of these two-and-a-half star movies, evidence of the difficulties the genre faced.

Should viewers compare one decade's four star movie to another decade's four star movie? That's a good question. I have attempted, in all cases, to apply the same standards to the horror films featured in all three of these decade books, but my tastes have evolved and changed.

Some films also feature an "Incantation," a witticism or line of dialogue from the reviewed film, or a "P.O.V.," testimony from the filmmakers. Some sections on important, influential films feature a "Legacy" notation which describes the movie's impact.

Also, as I did in *Horror Films of the 1980s*, I provide at the start of each year, a brief, general time-line of major world and national

events. This helps contextualize the movies and remind readers what was happening in the world when a movie was released.

I

It Depends on What the Meaning of the Word "Is" Is: An Introduction

The history of the horror movie is also the history of fear in America. Since the dawn of the technological art form known as film, those things that the nation has dreaded, derided and denied have often played starring roles on our silver screens as blood-curdling boogeymen. In the prequels to this text, *Horror Films of the 1970s* (2002) and *Horror Films of the 1980s* (2007), I presented the axiom that "art does not exist in a vacuum." Contrarily, it is "inextricably bound to the time period in which it was created."

Or, as genre scholar Joe Maddrey, author of *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*, said of horror movies: these productions "shape-shift" from decade to decade "as the fears of the popular audience change."¹

Since the topic at hand is horror films of the final decade of the twentieth century, the so-called Roaring 1990s, perhaps Maddrey's term "shape-shift" ought to be "morph" in honor of the ubiquitous digital special effects technology, CGI (computer-generated imagery), which came of age during this epoch of filmmaking.

Other than that tiny matter of trendy nomenclature, one truth remains self-evident: horror movies universally mirror the anxieties of their age and their audience. To scare an audience, a filmmaker must *understand* the audience. He or she must reflect the zeitgeist and pinpoint those things that unsettle and disturb; that torment and terrify. If horror isn't relevant to everyday life ... it isn't horrifying.

Successful films from every decade demonstrate this crucial art-imitates-life dynamic. The 1930s gave Americans escapist, romantic fare like *King Kong* (1933) as the antidote to the Great Depression. Despite economic difficulties, there were still new frontiers, like Skull Island, and new resources, like Kong himself, to harness.

The 1950s proffered a number of "giant insect" films like *Them!* (1954), which not so subtly conveyed audience anxieties over the new Pandora's Box blown open: the Atomic Age.

In the 1970s, the era of the ERA and *Roe v. Wade*, horror films obsessed on reproductive rights and women's lib (*It's Alive* [1973], *The Stepford Wives* [1975], *Demon Seed* [1977]) and other crises of the age, from Watergate-like conspiracies (*Jaws* [1975], *The Clonus Horror* [1979]) to unemployment and the energy crisis (*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* [1974]).



In the 1990s, Stephen King's literary works were "strip-mined" for cinematic consumption, including the short story *Graveyard Shift*. In the film version of that tale, John Hall (David Andrews) discovers unsafe working conditions ... and monster rats in the basement of a New England mill.

After the conservative Reagan Revolution of 1980, the popular "slasher" or "dead teenager" movie quickly became the most popular of all horror movie plots, showcasing an Old Testament-style response to

sin and the "do whatever feels good," counter-culture aesthetic of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

This reactive "vice precedes slice and dice" paradigm of the eighties saw horny, drug-using teens (usually at camp) punished for moral transgressions by draconian, machete-armed slashers. Pre-marital sex and smoking weed were punishable by decapitation, and the arrival of the silent, avenging slasher was often coupled with lightning and thunder, a cue that these monsters represented a force of nature or even God Himself, re-asserting old values and snuffing out transgression.

The 1980s also witnessed the rise of the AIDS epidemic, and the deadly disease proved a potent Bogeyman of the age in such films as *John Carpenter's The Thing* (1982) and *Prince of Darkness* (1987).

And that brings us to the bailiwick of this text. *What of the 1990s?*

As in previous decades of the 20th century, terror was bred explicitly from world and national events, from politics and culture. By 1990, Ronald Reagan was out of office. After the cowboy president rode off into the sunset, he was replaced by his vice-president, George H.W. Bush, a man who considered the high office his "political birthright."²

During Bush's presiding, America underwent a period of sweeping changes. The Cold War came to an abrupt and unexpected end. The Soviet Union fell, and suddenly it appeared that America had no serious enemy, no real international challenge. American uncertainty over what brand of "new world order" might replace the old, familiar one gave rise to a nebulous anxiety.

Nature abhors a vacuum, and so horror movies began to fill in this "enemy" gap with fictional foes, imagining sinister conspiracies of all types, mostly from inside America's borders. The U.S. Federal Government (*The XFiles: Fight the Future* [1998]), avaricious Big Business (*Carnosaur* [1993]), organized religion (*Stigmata* [1999]), the affluent upper class (*Eyes Wide Shut* [1999]) and even vampires (*Blade* [1998]) and Satanists (*The Ninth Gate* [1999]) colluded to re-shape America and the world in many signature 1990s horror films.

Despite the fall of the Berlin Wall, the funeral of the Soviet Union, and a successful War in the Gulf to free American ally Kuwait from the iron fist of Iraqi dictator and former U.S. ally, Saddam Hussein, the first Bush era was not a golden time for America. In part this was because the economy slipped into recession. The 1980s were over, and it was time to pay the piper for a decade of Reaganomics.

On Reagan's watch, the national debt had increased by two trillion dollars "while federal spending in real dollars and the federal payroll also rose."³ The nation's budget gap soared from eighty billion to two-hundred billion plus, and the Federal work force, which Reagan had vowed to shrink in his first inaugural address, increased from 2.8 million to three million.

Meanwhile, America lost between 300,000 and one million manufacturing jobs during Reagan's presidency and saw a steep rise in homelessness and poverty.⁴ For the average working family, weekly wages declined more quickly in the early 1990s than they had in the so-called "malaise days" of Jimmy Carter's presidency. White collar joblessness was also on the rise, at its worst plateau since the early 1930s. Unemployment stood at an alarming 7 percent. In this difficult economic environment, President Bush's term saw no rise in the minimum wage, and the president refused to authorize an extension of unemployment benefits. Tellingly, 1 percent of the American population owned a whopping 40 percent of the nation's wealth in the early 1990s.

The horror movies of the nineties soon began to reflect and transmit tales of economic woe and social inequity. Wes Craven's urban-themed *The People Under the Stairs* (1991) served as an indictment of the Reagan Revolution and featured a poor African American family attempting to rise up against their greedy white landlords.

Another highly-influential horror film of 1991, the Oscar-winning *The Silence of the Lambs*, directed by Jonathan Demme, also suggested that heartland America had been left untended for too long. It thus imagined perversion and madness sprouting like weeds in less affluent states such as West Virginia, in the personhood of home-bred serial killers. One poster seen briefly in the film, inside the home of serial killer Buffalo Bill, bore the legend "America: Open Your Eyes."

The People Under the Stairs and *The Silence of the Lambs* both showcased documentary footage of America's first fully televised war, Gulf War I, including night-time air force bombing raids over Baghdad. While America's infrastructure seemed to be crumbling from within, the country's money was being squandered on a war half-way across the world, these films note, in a country that was not a direct threat to American safety. Meanwhile, big problems like the need for universal health care or a plan to shore up the failing economy were being ignored.

In 1990, President Bush's approval ratings had been sky-high, towering at 70 percent (including a 74 percent approval with African

American voters and a 66 percent rating with Democrats). But as the economy grew worse, Bush's popularity dropped precipitously. It remains a supreme irony that the 1992 re-election prospects of George Bush—a man who had once termed Reagan's fiscal policies "voodoo economics"—hinged in large part on America's assessment of the economy handed to Bush by the retiring Gipper.

To Bush's misfortune, two prominent men challenged him for the presidency: deficit-obsessed Texas billionaire and quirky independent Ross Perot, and a charismatic "new" Democrat, Bill Clinton, the former governor of Arkansas and the face of "The New South."

President Bush faced anger on his right flank because he broke his 1988 convention speech pledge: "Read my lips: no new taxes." But, seeing that the economy was heading for a ditch, Bush attempted to reduce the deficit. He abandoned right-wing rhetoric and raised taxes with his signing of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990.

George Bush began the 1992 presidential campaign as a weak campaigner, but ended the season as a desperate one. At one point, he expressed amazement that a supermarket checkout line employed devices that could scan barcodes, cementing the popular notion of him as being out-of-touch.

As Election Day neared, Bush resorted to calling his opponents (Bill Clinton and vicepresidential candidate Al Gore) "*those Bozos*" and claiming that his pet dog, Millie, knew more about foreign policy than they did. Bush's career long flip-flops on major issues (abortion, taxes and voodoo economics) painted an unflattering picture of Bush as well. As one Bush biographer opined: "such drastic changes of position, such unrestrained attacks are necessary only if winning an election is more important than personal probity."⁵

At the Republican Convention, George Bush even lost control of his message about foreign policy experience, when firebrand Republican primary challenger Pat Buchanan (a former Nixon speechwriter) took the stage during prime time and delivered bloody red meat to the audience, an incendiary, divisive speech about the now-engaged "cultural war."

The agenda Clinton & Clinton would impose on America—abortion on demand, a litmus test for the Supreme Court, homosexual rights, discrimination against religious schools, women in combat—that's change, all right. But it is not the kind of change America wants. It is not the kind of change America needs. And it is not the kind of change we can tolerate in a nation that we still call God's country.... There is a religious war

going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself. And in that struggle for the soul of America, Clinton & Clinton are on the other side, and George Bush is on our side.⁶

This cultural war became the backdrop for increasing polarization throughout the 1990s, and many American horror movies dealt implicitly with the hot-button issues, from abortion (*The Unborn* [1991], *Alien3* [1992]), to political correctness (*Body Snatchers* [1994]), to affirmative action, welfare and racial issues (*Tales from the Hood* [1995], *Village of the Damned* [1995]).

After the political conventions, the campaign spiraled away from Bush. On October 14, 1992, the *Washington Post* reported that Bush's assistant secretary of state for consular affairs, Elizabeth Tamposi, had ordered State Department employees to illegally search Bill Clinton and Bill Clinton's mother's passport files for information that could be used against them in the campaign. Nothing was found, but the revelation of governmental snooping (especially against a candidate's elderly mother) was a distinct embarrassment to Bush.

On October 19, just days later, at a debate at the University of Richmond, George Bush responded poorly to a direct voter question about how the deficit affected him personally, and then, compounding the impression of the President's aristocratic detachment, he looked at his watch three times.

On October 31, 1992, just days before the election, former secretary of defense Casper Weinberger was indicted by Republican special prosecutor Larry Walsh for his behavior during the Iran Contra affair. His papers, available at the Library of Congress, proved that Bush had been less than circumspect about the extent of his involvement in Iran Contra. Bush had apparently not been out of the loop. On the contrary he seemed one of the key supporters of the guns-for-hostages swap.

When Election Day came around on November 3, Americans gathered for the largest voter turnout since 1960 and the Kennedy/Nixon contest. Ross Perot, whom Bush once described as a "take-my-marbles-and-go-home kind of guy if it doesn't go his way,"⁷ fared better than any third party candidate since 1912, drawing almost 19 percent of the popular vote. Despite missteps during his campaign, including terming African Americans "you people" at an NAACP meeting in July of 1992 and then briefly dropping out of the presidential race because he believed the CIA was stalking his

family(!), Perot's populist draw was also a powerful one. He pulled mostly from the Bush voter pool of ardent right-wingers, and Perot's candidacy handed Clinton, who had focused laser-like on the American economy during the campaign season, a substantial victory.

In the end, Clinton won the 1992 presidential election by cinching 370 Electoral College votes to Bush's meager 168, and winning 32 states to Bush's 18. Bush's showing was the worst for any sitting president since Taft; worse even than Herbert Hoover's re-election defeat at the hand of FDR. For the first time since 1976, America had selected a Democrat for the White House.

And they had selected a controversial one at that.

Rhodes Scholar, extrovert, and White House aspirant William Jefferson Clinton had once famously admitted on *60 Minutes* during the campaign (before the New Hampshire democratic primary) that he had caused "pain" in his marriage to Hillary Rodham Clinton. In other words, he'd cheated. Probably more than once. For the remainder of his two terms in office, gossip about Clinton's troubled personal life was every American's business.

In his quest to connect with voters personally, Clinton also dramatically lowered existing private-public barriers. In one instance, Clinton admitted when asked during a televised MTV town hall meeting, what kind of underwear he preferred to wear: usually briefs rather than boxers.

Clinton also famously acknowledged that he tried smoking pot, but only with the strange, exonerating caveat that he "didn't inhale." In the lingo of the era, this was probably "too much information."

However, for the burgeoning 24-hour news cycle and ratings-seeking cable news stations, like Fox and MSNBC, Clinton's two term presidency, with eight years of behavioral and verbal indiscretions, proved a delicious and renewable energy source, perpetual grist for the mill.

Clinton's often self-serving actions and easy explanations about dubious events (like the deferment of his Vietnam War service) contributed to an already widespread sense that America had become a nation obsessed with tabloid stories.

Lest it be forgotten, this was the decade of ice-skating whack-attacker Tonya Harding, the O.J. Simpson murder trial, serial killer (and cannibal) Jeffrey Dahmer, the parent-murdering Menendez brothers and penis-chopping Lorena Bobbitt.

It was the decade of *Inside Edition*, *A Current Affair*, *Extra*, *American Journal*, *America's Most Wanted*, *48 Hours*, *20/20*, *Dateline*,

and even *Rescue: 911*. It was also the decade of *The Jerry Springer Show*, *Geraldo*, *The Jenny Jones Show*, *Sally Jesse Raphael*, *Donohue* and *The Ricki Lake Show*.

Or, as author Nigel Hamilton wrote, capturing perfectly the spirit of the times:

A whole host of *People*-type magazines and broadcast programs were now proliferating across America—journals and programs in which the sex lives of the stars, the rich and the famous, the luminaries and the infamous, wallpapered journals in various stages of undress from literal cover to cover. Such vaudevillestyle, scurrilous entertainment, pivoting on human weaknesses and peccadilloes, had always characterized the popular press and for centuries had been disdainfully ignored by the literate middle and upper classes. That distinction ... was now past its sell-by date.⁸

Although some Americans were concerned about the cheapened national discourse, it made for exceedingly good business. During the height of the O.J. Simpson trial, the *National Enquirer* reportedly increased its circulation by half-a-million readers a week.

A number of horror movies in the 1990s soon featured anchorwomen and TV tabloid hosts as protagonists or supporting characters. From *Predator 2* (1990) to *Man's Best Friend* (1993), from *Scream* (1996) to *The Night Flier* (1997) to *Godzilla* (1998), the tabloid era saturated the horror genre. Tabloid talkers and TV show hosts, from Rush Limbaugh to Geraldo Rivera, were also widely lampooned in films as diverse as *Jack-O* (1995) and *Basket Case 3* (1992).

As the decade wore on, the nation at large seemed to accept Clinton's personal foibles, even though he was forced to prove his relevancy after a disastrous mid-term election in 1994 and a Republican sweep of Congress spearheaded by the new Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich.

Under Clinton and the Republican Congress, the American economy recovered by the middle of the decade and then took off at seeming warp speed because of the development of a new technology: *The Internet*.

The Internet spawned a whole new economic sector and marketplace in the 1990s, moving the country from the industrial age to the technology age. In the process, a so-called "dot-com" revolution put Americans back to work after the downsizing epidemic of the

early 1990s. The Internet actually generated a third of America's economic growth between the years 1995 and 1998.

Horror movies responded to this new technology as they always do: by ruthlessly exploiting the fear associated with the arrival of new and unfamiliar science. Films such as *The Lawnmower Man* (1992), *Ghost in the Machine* (1993) and *Brainscan* (1994) specifically presented "cyber" boogeymen threatening middle-class families, children and the nation in the new Internet Age. Other horror films of the day, such as a short tale in the anthology *Camp-fire Tales* (1997) featured Internet predators— monsters masquerading as "friends."

The Clinton decade concluded with a widespread fear of a technological black-out, the "Millennium Bug" of 1999. The genre responded to the imminent threat of Y2K with films about doomsday, including the religiously themed *End of Days* (1999).

In part because of the Internet, by mid- 1997, Clinton, the first Boomer President, was victoriously overseeing a resurgent, economically prosperous America. His policies had cut the deficit by two hundred-and-fifty billion dollars, eliminated one hundred wasteful government programs, cut taxes for fifteen million working families, and the economy produced nearly five million new jobs.⁹

Historian Haynes Johnson reported the following in his dramatic assessment of the Clinton Years:

Driven by the force of the longest, continuous peacetime boom, the expanding American economy lifted what was already the highest standard of living in the world to even greater heights. So rapid was the growth, so sustained the boom, that Americans were experiencing the best of all economic worlds: low inflation and low unemployment, high productivity and record high profits.¹⁰

Clinton had, without draconian cuts in services, made government more effective, more responsive and more entrepreneur friendly. The first so-called "globalist" commander-in-chief, Clinton believed that lower tariffs would result in lower prices and greater exports; and some impressed economists even suggested that his tariff reduction policy was the greatest tax cut in the history of the world. Others, including Ross Perot, were concerned that Clinton's free trade policies like NAFTA were going to ship American jobs across the border. At least two horror films of the nineties, *Dolly Dearest* (1992) and *The Mangler* (1995), gazed, at least tangentially, at the changes in the workplace wrought by globalization.

Another feather in Bill Clinton's cap was welfare reform. Clinton's policy in this matter increased workplace participation among poor women (from 30 to 55 percent) between the years 1996 and 1999, and actually resulted in an uptick in black homes with two married parents, from 34.8 to 38.9 percent. Clinton had empathy for the working poor, and his policies reflected that empathy. The president expanded Head Start, created a new national service program called AmeriCorps, increased the Earned Income Tax Credit, and his College Tax Credit Plan of 1997 was larger, in fact, than the famous G.I. Bill of Rights. Clinton's self-described "third way" approach thus married conservative responsibility with liberal spending. Again, economists took note of his unexpected successes.

Clinton succeeded where Reagan failed ... although Reagan was the great communicator, Clinton was the great policy wonk who repaired the theoretical flaws in Reaganomics, effectively solved problems such as welfare and the budget, and offered a coherent governing philosophy of the global era.¹¹

America was doing so well by the late 1990s, in fact, that most Americans simply wanted to look the other way when it was widely reported that Clinton's perpetual nemesis, Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, had uncovered evidence of the President's illicit sexual relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, a woman young enough to be Clinton's daughter. At the same time, President Clinton was also being sued for sexual harassment by a woman in Arkansas named Paula Jones.

For horror movies, Clinton's self-destructive personal tendency to over-share and act like "The Big Creep" (as Lewinsky memorably called the commander-in-chief in a missive to Linda Tripp) proved great creative fodder. Clinton's unique, charismatic persona brought to the political stage one of the most potent monsters of the decade, *the Interloper*.

In fairness, the Interloper—a *person who "breaks" into the life of a respected, public and private person, often through that victim's intentionally lowered barriers or personal foibles*—existed well before Clinton ever assumed power.

In the 1990s, Interlopers such as Amy Fisher (the Long Island Lolita), Mary Kay Le Tourneau (a teacher who abused her position to engage in sex with an underage student) and Yolanda Saldivar (the fan club president who killed the Tejano sensation, Selena), were a dime a dozen, each granted their fifteen minutes of fame.

But Clinton was the perfect president for the Interloper Age: a chief executive who himself welcomed an Interloper, Lewinsky, into his inner sanctum, the Oval Office, and then came to rue his indiscretion. A remarkably successful presidency was nearly toppled.

Nineties movies such as *Single White Female* (1991), *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992), *Poison Ivy* (1992), *The Crush* (1993), *The Temp* (1993), *The River Wild* (1994), *Mother's Boys* (1994), and *The Fan* (1996) all featured this brand of villain, most often a woman, threatening to destroy the life and reputation of a well-established, respected man, whether a writer, a politician, a celebrity or a sports figure.

The popular 1980s monster, the slasher, had thus been "remade" in the 1990s "as a canny and always intriguing serial killer or indefatigable psycho stalker" in the words of horror authority Jonathan Lake Crane. "Average hacks, those who commit just an ordinary murder or two, fail to command much attention at the Cineplex." ¹²

In terms of the serial killer, there was again a connection to Clinton. No, he wasn't a serial killer (no matter what his right-wing enemies would have you believe, vis-à-vis, the infamous "Clinton Body Count").

However, like Hannibal Lecter, *Basic Instinct's* (1992) Catherine Trammell or *Se7en's* (1995) John Doe, he was a charismatic, silvertongued and seductive *talker* who could convincingly present his case in the most self-serving light. He played to the press, and could really "make a dog hunt," to re-parse a Clinton-ism: he could dominate and demand attention with his colorful and larger-than-life disposition and charm. And like these celebrity, movie serial killers, Clinton, called "Slick Willy" by his enemies, would sometimes even talk at such length that he would stumble right into unintentional accountability for his actions.

Importantly, both brands of 1990 villains—the Interloper and the Serial Killer—are reality-based, not supernaturally-based, boogeymen. This change reflects the sweep of the motion picture's evolution over the decades, a turn away from the artificiality and theatricality of early films (like musicals) and in favor of ever-increasing naturalism or "realism."

The 1990s represents a turning point in this trend because the serial killers and Interlopers of these films use the same method as their slasher predecessors: bloody murder. Hannibal Lecter eats his victims after bludgeoning them to death. The killer in *Basic Instinct* hacks lovers to bits with an ice pick. John Doe stages elaborate,

sickening murders for his sinful victims in *Se7en*. And the sociopath of *The Temp* (1993) arranges for an allergic co-worker to be stung to death by bees. But despite the similarity in *modus operandi* to the 1980s slashers, these 1990s crimes occur in increasingly realistic, naturalistic settings.

Horror movies of the 1990s deliberately moved away from teenage protagonists in remote locations (like a sleep away camp, for instance) and brought the slasher heirs, serial killers and Interlopers, into the realms of the American suburban family house and the professional work-place. For some dedicated horror fans, this shift represented an unacceptable watering down of horror as a transgressive, decorum-shattering genre and a lunge towards the mundane. Even to this day, many enthusiasts steadfastly refuse to recognize the serial killer and Interloper films as "real" horror, writing them off as "thrillers" instead.

Of course, if this narrow definition is accepted, the horror genre will also sacrifice such titles as *Psycho* (1960), *Peeping Tom* (1960), *Repulsion* (1965), *Halloween* (1978) and even *Friday the 13th* (1980), since all those landmarks also feature no overt supernatural elements. Clearly then, the supernatural can't be the dividing line between horror and thrillers. It's murkier than that.

But, again, why the shift in the 1990s towards the naturalistic end of the horror spectrum? There were many reasons. Author and horror scholar John W. Morehead elaborates, "Several aspects of changes in Western culture may account for this. In the past the monster as the expression of evil and the 'cultural other' tended to be externalized and came from 'beyond,' especially with the emphasis on supernatural evil. With modernity the monster has become more natural, less distant and removed, more like us, and at the same time perhaps also become the dual object of fascination and repulsion.

"When these changes come together the serial killer becomes the ideal representation of our fears: such individuals are natural vs. supernatural (although many times exhibiting "supernatural" abilities, such as the inability to die, at least completely)," he continues. "They arise from within our own cultural and social sphere, and they present a very human face of evil (perhaps indicating our fears that social institutions cannot restrain the darker aspects of who we are)."

Horror movies of the 1990s moved into this more realistic realm for another reason too. Unlike decades past, studios were now actively pushing genre-oriented movies with much larger budgets and A-list casts and directors. And much larger budgets dictate, among other things, excessive creative compromise; so as to draw in the widest

possible audience share.

Or, as editor Jon Lewis noted in his book, *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the 1990s*:

Conglomerates have imposed institutional mediocrity on the films they produce. In view of the enormous cost of production and distribution, this only makes financial, if not artistic sense.¹³

In practice, the big studio approach of the 1990s meant that horror movies could not limit the size of their audiences in any way; could not afford even to be known, simply, as a horror film. Much-honored Mike Nichols, for instance, refused to call his movie, *Wolf* (1994)—a werewolf movie starring Jack Nicholson—a horror movie. No, it was actually "an adventure," by his phrasing. This "it's not a horror movie" claim was repeated again and again in the 1990s by directors, actors and producers ad infinitum, ad nauseum.

In terms of marketing, horror movies were not even allowed to continue the tradition of crafting colorful titles. Previous generations saw movies with colorful, flamboyant names like *The Last House on the Left* (1972), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). The 1990s presented horror movies with titles such as *The Guardian* (1990), *Popcorn* (1991), *The Crush* (1993), *The Temp* (1993), *Hideaway* (1995) and *Scream* (1996). This shift reflects the studio desire for the horror genre to move in a much more generic, wide-appeal direction. Given the "morphing" face of horror movies in the age, what phrase best encapsulates nineties horror?

You'll find it as the title of this very introduction.

The phrase originates from the videotaped grand jury testimony of President William Jefferson Clinton, recorded on August 17, 1998. A prosecutor working for Ken Starr asked the president if the statement "there is no sex of any kind in any manner, shape or form, with President Clinton" was "utterly false" in regards to Monica Lewinsky.¹⁴

The president's answer quickly became famous. "It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is," said Clinton, attempting to walk the narrow line between what was truth and what was legal.

Assessing the horror films of the 1990s, one must ask oneself the self-same question.

Is *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), which spends its first hour as a violent crime drama like *Pulp Fiction* (1994), a horror movie?

It depends on what the meaning of the word "is" is.

Is *The Devil's Advocate* (1997), a courtroom drama that happens to involve the Devil (Al Pacino) as head of a New York law firm, a horror movie?

It depends on what the meaning of the word "is" is.

What about Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*? Police procedural or a horror film?

Again, it depends on your definition.

What about *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) now recast for modern times as an epic love story? What about *Interview with a Vampire* (1994), with its tragic, Byronic vampires? What about Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996), which mixes caustic humor with horror thrills? Or Sam Raimi's *Army of Darkness* which is something akin to *The Evil Dead* (1983) meets *The Three Stooges*?

As these examples indicate the horror movies of the 1990s—more than in any decade before or since—blurred genres and transcended existing categories. In his book, *Genre and Audience*, Mark Jancovich looks more closely at this issue:

When *Silence of the Lambs* was released in the U.S. on Valentine's Day, 1991, sections of the press scrupulously avoided any direct association of the film with the horror genre. Many reviews established the film's association with horror, but then ... neutralized it. In place of generic classifications, reviewers deployed ambivalent adjectives: "terrifying," "brutally real," "chilling," "macabre," "dark."¹⁵

Following this line of thinking, perhaps the safest way to determine if a movie is "horror" is to recruit those very adjectives; to include for review in this text all the movies that are "chilling," "macabre," and "dark." Yet this approach is perhaps too inclusive, too liberal. Many dramas are "dark," many documentaries prove "chilling" and many war movies seem "brutally real."

See? The definition of "horror" in the 1990s is no simple matter.

Many horror auteurs and their productions seemed to recognize that the genre was at a turning point, a crossroads in the final decade of the twentieth century. Instead of focusing on issues that explicitly scared audiences, some films thus became incredibly post-modern, incredibly reflexive exercises. What they looked at most clearly ... was their reflection in the mirror. *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994)

studied the role of horror films in American society, and compared itself to accepted bedtime stories such as *Hansel & Gretel*. John Carpenter's *In The Mouth of Madness* (1995) turned reality itself into a horror movie, and *Popcorn* (1991) used as its organizing principle the very history of the horror genre, going back to the 1950s.

The aforementioned *Scream* (1996) was built upon a foundation of canny movie references, even encoding the "solution" of the killer's cloaked identity in a concealed reference to another 1990s horror film, *Mother's Boys* (1994). That allusion carried an important aspect of *Scream's* unmasked killer, Billy Loomis: he too was a Momma's Boy.

The decade's most controversial horror film, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), was, on the surface, about a simple matter (kids getting hopelessly lost in the woods), but it was also a post-modern film, one that studied the way that media images insulate viewers from horror, creating a filter and emotional distance from troubling reality.

Many of these cerebral efforts are extremely intriguing and smart, but only a few of them (namely *Scream* and *The Blair Witch Project*) actually found box office success and popular approval. The intellectual approach wasn't necessarily a formula that mainstream audiences could get behind, even if the critics dug it. To a large extent, the "it depends on what the meaning of 'is' is" horror movies of the 1990s are nobody's children. By and large, many of these cinematic orphans disappeared into a black hole. Horror fans don't speak of them as often as they do films from other decades, and even the best horror bloggers don't write about them as much, either.

Put bluntly, they are the stepchildren of the horror genre. This is why, for so many horror enthusiasts, the 1990s represent a "dark age."

"There are a lot of people in recent years that have said it's unfair to say that horror movies went through a dark period in the 1990s," suggests Brian Solomon, author and administrator of *Vault of Horror*. "However, I can't say I agree with those people. I felt that way both during the 1990s, and since.

"For a couple of reasons, that decade was the nadir for the genre. For one thing, after the visceral horror of the 1970s and the balls-out fun horror of the 1980s, the stuff we got in the '90s was markedly subdued. I feel that there was a backlash against the over-the-top horror of the previous two decades, resulting in more safe and tame horror films that were more acceptable to the masses. We generally find less blood and guts, less gratuitous nudity, less fun.

"There's certain homogeneity to horror films of the 1990s," he continues. "This is why the great exceptions to that—films like *Dead Alive* and *From Dusk Till Dawn*—are the films that buck the trend and

go all-out. Furthermore, I believe that we saw some of the most graphic and visually disturbing horror films ever in the decade now ending [the 2000s], in large part as a counter-reaction to the way things were reigned in during the 1990s."

Why did the 1990s take such an unsatisfactory shape, at least according to those who love and study horror with so much devotion? There are three primary reasons. To begin with, a pervasive sense of sameness crept into the genre and can't be discounted. A whopping percentage of the decade's horror movies (even the supernatural ones) are structured as police procedurals and highlight cops or FBI agents as the protagonists. After a while, the multitudinous clichés inherent in this form (the cop with the tragic past, the killer with the newspaper clippings, the messages to cops, scrawled in victims' blood, etc.) simply weigh down these nineties narratives with their crushing, deflating sense of familiarity.

In the 2000s, the police procedural was largely discarded as a horror movie structure, but in the 1990s it is downright ubiquitous. The decade's idea of diversity in storytelling is to feature a woman or African American in the role of serial-killer hunter, a distinction without a difference, narratively speaking, to quote Al Gore.



The 1990s ushered in a brave new world of special effects, thanks to maestros such as the late Stan Winston, pictured

here with one of his impressive *Jurassic Park* (1993) velociraptors.

Secondly, advances in cheap digital cameras in the mid-1990s opened up the spectacular independent film movement of the decade. This was a wonderful development for young filmmakers breaking into the business, and brought to light new directors including Kevin Smith, Richard Linklater, Guinevere Turner, Michael Moore, Ed Burns, and most of all, Quentin Tarantino.

In an earlier decade, however, probably each and every one of these considerable talents would have made their break in the industry the way that directors had in previous generations: through horror movies.

However, in the 1990s, the advent of film festivals like Sundance and the opportunity to make movies cheap meant that directors could make so-called "prestigious" first films outside genre confines. They didn't need the popular market of the horror film to establish their careers. So Moore made documentaries, Burns and Smith produced relationship movies (in a Gen X, slacker mode) and Tarantino explored, for the most part, the crime milieu.

Unlike the sixties, seventies and eighties, a span which gave the world George Romero, Roman Polanski, Tobe Hooper, Wes Craven, John Carpenter, Sam Raimi and other horror maestros, the 1990s seemed to host a rather deflated rate of creating new "horror" directors. About the only ones who immediately leap to mind are David Fincher, who directed *Alien3* (1992) and *Se7en* (1995), and Richard Stanley, creator of *Hardware* (1990) and *Dust Devil* (1992).

Horror movies of the 1990s suffered for another important reason, too. For the first time in history, they received competition from the increasingly popular world of television. In the year 1993, producer Chris Carter created a TV series called *The X-Files*, a horror show which revolved around attractive F.B.I. agents Scully (Gillian Anderson) and Mulder (David Duchovny). Every week, the intriguing and well-developed characters dealt in 1990s genre concerns like science run amok, conspiracies, aliens, and most importantly, monsters of the week (vampires, werewolves, succubi, mutants, fluke-men, etc.).



The truth is in here: Chris Carter's TV initiative *The X-Files* outperformed 1990s horror movies on a regular basis. Pictured here are iconic F.B.I agents Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson, left) and Fox Mulder (David Duchovny).

From 1993 through the end of the decade *The X-Files* produced some of the most visually accomplished horror of its time, movies included. Making matters graver for horror films, the TV series aired for the first three years (through 1996) on Friday night, the very night that would make or break a new horror movie at the box office.

Quite simply, and without exaggeration, *The X-Files* showed them up ... for the better part of a decade. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the horror film's resurgence in the 2000s closely coincided with the final shuttering of *The X-Files* in 2002.

Chris Carter reflected upon the visual style of *The X-Files*, and the series' impact on horror movies on my blog in December 2009.¹⁶

"First of all, in television people haven't quite been given the opportunity to produce things that were so visual. It was sort of by demand on our part. We had to tell these really scary thriller stories, and they couldn't be done from one angle, two-shots. They needed to be done in a multi-faceted, delivery-of-information way. So we got to emulate a lot of what I loved about film, and we got to do it on a television schedule," Carter explains.

"It didn't happen right away, but not long after we started, we were given what I call respectable budgets," he details. "We needed to tell these stories in interesting visual ways; we took an artistic approach. We were one of the first shows to give credit to the director of photography and the production designer, and other people up front in a television show. So we had the budget and the desire to push the limits. I always say *"we didn't understand what we didn't understand"* about producing a TV show like this. We tried everything. I point to something like the [submarine] conning tower coming out of the ice in season two ("Colony"/ "Endgame.") We refrigerated a sound stage, brought in tons of snow and ice and built this conning tower. I didn't know you couldn't do that. So we just started doing things.

"I always said that we weren't doing horror and couldn't do horror based on the standards-and-practices that were applied to the shows," Carter notes. "We did an episode like "Home," [about inbred cannibals] and the day after we did it I was given a very stern lecture by Standards and Practices about never, ever pushing those limits again. And you see where horror went after *The X-Files*. The *Saw* series for instance; it had to push limits that we couldn't push on television."



Horror movies about horror movies: With the Cold War over, Wes Craven's *New Nightmare* (1994) and other 1990s films

**obsessed about the impact of horror films on society.
Heather Langenkamp and Miko Hughes are pictured here.**

In short then, horror films of the 1990s suffered from a sense of generic sameness in format (the dang police procedural), from an unprecedented draining of the young talent pool of a generation, which migrated to the independent film movement, and, finally, from some serious, heavy-hitting competition: *The X-Files* on Friday nights, the box office's all-important "opening day."

Because of these factors, many critics and horror enthusiasts may desire to experience amnesia concerning the genre as it existed in the days of the 1990s. In the vernacular of the day, they may declare: "don't go there!"

But in response, of course, the scholar and explorer must reply—also in 1990s slang—"talk to the hand!"

These horror films, while perhaps no one's favorites, still inform audiences about who we were in the era of Bill Clinton, Rachel haircuts, boy bands, CompuServe, and the Psychic Friends Network. And these horrors do so in abundance, and often with a welcome surfeit of intelligence, if not necessarily authentic scares.

So let's turn the clock back, pre-Y2K, slip on some cargo pants, crank up the Ace of Base and relax with a nice, cool Zima. Return now to an era of "vague discontent," teen cynicism, silly horror comedies, self-referential slashers and high falutin' literary adaptations of horror classics.

What was up with horror films of the 1990s? (Or rather, waaasssssuppp?) Let's find out together if "the truth is out there."

II

The Horror Genome Project: A Decade of Aliens, Conspiracies, Interlopers, Serial Killers, Science Run Amok and Other Grim Trends

I Want to Believe: The Aliens Are Coming...

Many historians have credited the beginning of the Cold War in the 1950s with piquing American interest in flying saucers and UFO visitations. The thawing of the Cold War between the United States of America and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s served to renew the fascination with the possibility of otherworldly invaders. With no new significant "enemy" to fight here on Earth, Americans once again watched the skies.

"People have become more open-minded toward paranormal phenomena," suggested Vicki Ecker, the editor of *UFO Magazine*, in an interview with *Cinescape* in 1996. "The state of the world is at a more critical stage now than it has ever been before, and it tends to pull the human mind into realms that might typically be considered nonsensical."¹

On three separate occasions in the late 1980s, President Ronald Reagan made references to alien invasions in public speeches: on December 4, 1985, on September 15, 1987, and September 21, 1987.

When Bill Clinton assumed the presidency in 1993, he assigned his deputy attorney general, Webster Hubbell, to bring him data on two important national mysteries. The first was the Kennedy assassination. The second involved the existence of UFOs.²

Hubbell was not successful in either quest.

This initial inquiry wasn't President Clinton's only attempt to discover the truth about flying saucers. His Executive Order 12958, issued on April 17 of 1995, involved "Classified National Security

Information" and its purpose, allegedly, was to permit Clinton access to files withheld from him by the CIA; files believed to concern the existence of UFOs.

In August of the same year, Clinton met with his friend and supporter, philanthropist Laurance S. Rockefeller, in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, to discuss UFOs. Specifically, Rockefeller wanted Clinton to re-open the famous Roswell case files of 1947.



Keep watching the skies: The evil aliens arrived on Earth in the nineties, including in the nineties update of *War of the Worlds*, the disaster film *Independence Day* (1996).

To recount that particular tale, in Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947, a UFO reportedly crashed and was captured by the U.S. government.³ But the federal government claimed the "crashed" ship was just a weather balloon, and this explanation paved the way for generations of critics to cry "cover up." The year 1997 brought the new 1990s UFO craze to a fever pitch as the Roswell incident celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with reports about it in newspapers, magazines and on television.

The decade also brought several famous UFO sightings, including one by the crew of the shuttle *Discovery* in Earth orbit in 1991, on

mission STS-48. The sighting—captured on videotape—was later dismissed as evidence of "ice particles" in space.

The so-called "Phoenix Lights" represented another important sighting of the decade, occurring in the U.S., in Arizona and Nevada on March 13, 1997. In this instance, several thousand people reported seeing a gigantic UFO overhead, one of arrowhead configuration and replete with five underside engines. Although at the time, Arizona governor Fife Symington III held a press conference dismissing the "Phoenix Lights," a decade later he admitted to having seen the unexplained phenomenon himself.

By 1997, a Roper Poll suggested that a whopping 80 percent of the American population believed that the U.S. Government was withholding information about the existence of UFOs and aliens. This high level of cynicism was especially ironic given President Clinton's evident interest in UFOs.

An even darker side of the nation's UFO obsession became plain in 1997. The members of a cult called Heaven's Gate committed mass suicide under the direction of its leader Marshall Applewhite on March 19th, based on the belief a UFO was trailing the approaching Hale-Bopp comet. According to Applewhite the only way for humans to board the highly-advanced craft was to take their souls to a level beyond human existence. Over three days, 39 people died after ingesting Phenobarbital mixed with pudding or applesauce, and then suffocating themselves in plastic bags. Many of the cult members referred to themselves as an "Away Team," an unfortunate reference to the popular 1990s series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987– 1994).

Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, UFOs were virtually everywhere in the pop culture. As the nineties commenced, author Whitley Streiber was in the midst of his "alien" book cycle; literary works of non-fiction that detailed his repeated night-time abductions by alien beings called "Grays." Streiber's titles included *Communion* (1987), *Transformation* (1988), *Majestic* (1989), *Breakthrough* (1995), *The Secret School* (1996), *The Communion Letters* (1997) and *Confirmation* (1998).

Similarly, author Budd Hopkins had a *New York Times* best-seller with his story of alien abduction, regression hypnosis, and "missing time" in the 1987 non-fiction book *Intruders*. After a successful miniseries based on *Intruders* in 1992, directed by Dan Curtis, Hopkins followed up with a second successful book in 1996, entitled *Witnessed*. These books are significant because they took the UFO obsession and mythos into a new terrain: the bedrooms of unwitting Americans, now "victims" of both an alien plot and insidious medical experimentation.

Television stoked the 1990s UFO craze. The mock-documentary *Alien Autopsy: Fact or Fiction* (1995) aired on August 25, 1995, and was hosted by *Star Trek: The Next Generation's* Jonathan Frakes. It depicted a grainy surgical procedure performed on what was said to be an alien from the Roswell Crash.

In 1994, a TV movie called *Roswell* starring Kyle MacLachlan reconstructed the notorious Arizona case and its alleged government coverup. In 1996, an NBC TV series called *Dark Skies* asserted that "Grays" were already on Earth and changing the shape of human history, beginning with the Kennedy assassination and leading right up to present day.

In 1999, another series titled *Roswell* (1999– 2002) followed three "alienated" alien teenagers who emigrated to Earth from the crashed Roswell UFO. The program depicted their daily travails as they tried to make it through life in a 1990s American high school.

But the production most responsible for feeding the public's seemingly endless fascination with UFOs was Chris Carter's landmark dramatic initiative, *The X-Files* (1993–2002). The series' central protagonist, Fox Mulder (David Duchovny), as a child had witnessed the abduction of his sister Samantha in the early 1970s. This horrifying event was featured in flashback in the episode, "Little Green Men," first aired September 16, 1994.

As an F.B.I. agent in the 1990s "Spooky" Mulder was obsessed with UFO reports, the abduction experience, and other aspects of alien existence. Across its catalogue, *X-Files* episodes dealt with such important U.F.O. related concepts as missing time ("Pilot"), American spycrafts fashioned from recovered, reverse-engineered U.F.O. technology ("Deep Throat"), secret communication with aliens ("Conduit"), the government's acquisition of alien DNA ("The Erlenmeyer Flask"), and even Agent Scully's abduction by aliens in the two-parter "Duane Barry"/"Ascension."

Chris Carter brought a highly cinematic approach to *The X-Files*, not to mention intelligence and a sense of wit. These factors, in tandem with the fascinating subject matter, made the program a bona fide pop culture phenomenon. Very quickly, *The X-Files* was to the 1990s what *Star Trek* had been to the 1960s and 1970s, and a huge fandom organized itself around Carter's universe.

The 1990s also brought extra-terrestrial themed blockbusters to theaters, ranging from *The War of the Worlds* styled disaster flick *Independence Day* (1996) from director Roland Emmerich to the superhero-styled comedy/ fantasy *Men in Black* (1997).

Naturally, the horror genre also took note of the national

fascination with life forms from the final frontier. In at least one such case, "first contact" was a frightening, dark experience with malevolent beings.

In 1993, the film *Fire in the Sky* depicted the "true" story of Travis Walton (1957–), a logger who, on November 5, 1975, was allegedly abducted by a flying saucer. A prompt and intensive search by local authorities failed to find Walton, until he was mysteriously "returned" five days later.

Robert Leiberman's movie focuses more deeply on the fall-out between friends Travis (D.B. Sweeney) and Mike Rogers (Robert Patrick) than on the veracity of Walton's abduction account. However, during *Fire in the Sky*'s climax, Leiberman escorts the audience through a visceral, macabre tour of a creepy UFO interior, as well as Travis's medical "examination" by malevolent, diminutive "Gray"-style creatures. This harrowing, superbly-designed and executed sequence proves extremely frightening, though the scene differed significantly from Walton's account of his time on the alien vessel.

Alien invaders came to Earth in other films too. Director Abel Ferrara staged a third cinematic "invasion" by pod-people in *Body Snatchers* (1994). A continuation of the 1978 film starring Donald Sutherland, this new version of the Jack Finney novel was released right as a phenomenon known as "political correctness" was seeping to the forefront of American pop-culture. Uniquely, *Body Snatchers* set its action in a locale where group-think was more difficult to identify: an American army base in the Bible Belt. The film also looked at 1990s family dynamics, particularly a "blended" family in which a mother could be replaced, apparently in body and spirit, by a step-mother.

Robert Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters* was also adapted to film in 1994, and it too featured parasitic alien creatures taking over human bodies. In this case, even the president of the United States was endangered by the attack, and it was up to the government, once more led by Donald Sutherland, to beat back the intruders.



The Age of Clinton brought back Jack Finney's pod people for a third cinematic go-round. Meg Tilly's Carol makes conformity look sensual in Abel Ferrara's *Body Snatchers* (1994). Also pictured, the imperiled American family man, Steve (Terry Kinney).

Species (1995) concerned mysterious alien instructions beamed to Earth from space: a recipe to genetically construct an alien-human hybrid. Unfortunately, for Earthmen this hybrid, a gorgeous woman called Sil (Natasha Henstridge), was intent on populating the world with monstrous non-human offspring. With its emphasis on sex and featuring an alien monster designed by H.R. Giger, *Species* proved one of the big horror hits of the mid-1990s and spawned a middling sequel about the male of the "species" in 1998.

David Twohy's *The Arrival* (1996) blamed a conspiracy by secretive, malevolent aliens for the global warming crisis here on Earth and pitted an astronomer, played by Charlie Sheen, against the extra-terrestrials. The aliens had technology on their side, including terrifying "black hole bombs" which could suck all the matter of out of a small radius, a memorable special effect.



Not all evil aliens in the 1990s appeared scary. Meet Natasha Henstridge's sexy Sil from the box office hit *Species* (1995).

Another 1990s horror, *The X-Files: Fight the Future* (1998), also involved a conspiracy to cover up the union of high-ranking government officials with evil alien invaders. After a prehistoric prologue, the film begins with a startling image: a Federal building bombed and destroyed in Red State America, an explosive reminder of the Oklahoma City bombing of April 19, 1995. In the movie the government destroyed the building in an attempt to hide evidence of the alien presence on Earth. Interestingly, the X-Files mythology as explained in the film, directed by Rob Bowman, suggests that the aliens, who start their life cycle as "black oil," are actually the original

inhabitants of the planet. We're just slave labor, bodies to be harnessed.

The 1990s also saw the continuation of two popular alien-centric franchises from earlier decades. The year 1990 brought *Predator 2*, which pitted a Los Angeles cop played by Danny Glover against the monstrous, technological hunter from another world. *Alien3* (1992) and *Alien Resurrection* (1997) continued the tale of warrant officer Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) and her attempts to keep the Company (and later, the military) from acquiring xenomorphic biology for insidious use. Both *Alien* films in the 1990s were set in outer space, though *Alien Resurrection* ended with a landing on Earth. Unlike the first two films in the long-lived franchise, both 1990s sequels met with divided audience and critical response.

I Only Trust Algorithms: The Conspiracy's Afoot

In the nineties, conspiracy theories flourished across America. As previously noted, many U.S. citizens believed that their Federal government was hiding evidence of alien contact, but the UFO conspiracy seems downright innocent compared to many of the strange theories that roiled the decade and became a critical part of the decade's Zeitgeist.

"People feel crushed by the government, abused by corporate employment, and baffled by computers," noted author and film critic Richard Corliss in his article in *Time* magazine: "The Invasion Has Begun."⁴

Accordingly, then, people blamed their leaders for these problems. Not surprisingly, the two U.S. presidents of the 1990s, George Bush and Bill Clinton, quickly proved the focal figures for a number of conspiracy theories. George H.W. Bush had actually been a popular figure in conspiracy memes for decades because of his former role in government in the 1970s as a so called "spook" and Nixon's director of the C.I.A.

George Bush was also in Texas the day JFK was killed, he served Richard Nixon through Watergate and up until his resignation, and was rumored to be involved in the October 1980 deal with Iran that arranged for American hostages not to be released until Reagan was inaugurated, thus dooming incumbent Jimmy Carter. His role in Iran-Contra is now known.

Adding fuel to the fire, one of Bush's sons, Neil, was slated to have dined with Bush supporter Scott Hinckley on the very day in

1981 of the attempted assassination on Ronald Reagan by Scott's brother, John Hinckley, Jr. Coincidence, or collusion?

At one point or another, both of Bush's most notable international foes, Manuel Noriega and Saddam Hussein, were reputed to have been in league with Bush and the C.I.A. Moreover, Bush's September 11, 1990, speech describing his "dream" of a "New World Order" was believed by many conspiracy theorists to have been an enunciation of the long-planned "One World" domination by International Bankers, the Rockefellers and The Trilateral Commission (of which Bush had once been a member). Even the Gulf War was viewed through the paranoid prism of conspiracy. Some people believed that Bush secretly permitted Iraq to invade Kuwait because of Big Oil interests.

Bill Clinton was also no stranger to conspiracy theories. Moral Majority leader Jerry Falwell hawked a "documentary" called *The Clinton Chronicles: An Investigation into the Alleged Criminal Activities of Bill Clinton*. Among other accusations, the film suggested that Clinton had ordered the murder of his White House counsel, Vince Foster, even though his death in 1993 had been ruled a suicide.

This crime was alleged to have been part of the infamous "Clinton Body Count," a reference to the fifty to sixty "associates" of the Clintons that had died under mysterious circumstances once they took power. The same anti-Clinton forces also argued that the former governor was running a cocaine and money laundering business out of Mena, Arkansas. Though these charges were eventually refuted by the House of Representatives, some people still cling to these beliefs, even today.

As late as 1999, many right-wingers, including Christian broadcaster Pat Robertson, suggested that Clinton would use Y2K as an excuse to empower FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) and order permanent martial law in the United States.

Other conspiracies abounded in the 1990s. Big Oil killed the electric car. Rock sensation and youth idol Kurt Cobain was murdered. IBM cheated in the match between Big Blue and chess champ Garry Kasparov. TWA Flight 800 didn't crash in the Atlantic Ocean on July 17, 1996, by accident, but because of either friendly fire from a nearby naval vessel or a terrorist attack—depending on your political leanings—and the government was covering it all up.

And Princess Diana's death was not accidental, either. She was targeted for assassination by the Royal Family, and the act was carried out by agents of MI6 (not 007, I trust...). The seatbelts in her car had even been sabotaged before the incident, just to assure her death.

Although these conspiracies indeed sound far-fetched, not all 1990s conspiracies are flights of hysterical fancy. The decade did witness real conspiracies in action, especially if a conspiracy is defined specifically as "a combination of persons for a secret, unlawful or evil purpose."

For instance, the Oklahoma City bombing of April 19, 1995, which brought down the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building and left 168 Americans dead and 800 people wounded, was certainly the product of a conspiracy involving at least two individuals, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, and perhaps more.

Likewise, the 1993 World Trade Center bombing was a conspiracy carried out by foreign nationals: radical Islamic terrorists protesting American involvement in the affairs of the Middle East. Ramsi Yousef was the mastermind of the bombing, but likely had as many as five other co-conspirators, not to mention who knows how many financiers.

At the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandal near the end of the decade, First Lady Hilary Clinton went on *The Today Show* on NBC and, in rather grandiose terms, identified another conspiracy, one aimed squarely at her husband, the president of the United States. The First Lady called it "a vast right-wing conspiracy," and many people laughed off the paranoid-sounding phraseology.

But history has proven Clinton's assertion correct. We now know that *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* owner and billionaire Richard Mellon Scaife funded *The American Spectator* magazine and hired "reporters" including David Brock to dig up dirt on Bill Clinton, spending over two-million dollars in the process. This endeavor was known as "The Arkansas Project" and it obsessed over Vince Foster's suicide, Whitewater, Trooper Gate and Paula Jones, among other would-be scandals. The goal was explicit and organized: to destroy Clinton's presidency, to effectively delegitimize him with voters.

Scaife also gave over \$500,000 to something called "Accuracy in Media," an organization which "promoted" the idea that Vince Foster may have been murdered. Likewise, the tycoon gifted thirteen million dollars to Pepperdine University over three decades. In the 1990s Pepperdine offered independent counsel Kenneth Starr a prominent position when his report to Congress about Clinton's misbehavior was complete.⁵

Another player in the vast right-wing conspiracy was publisher Lucianne Goldberg, who encouraged government employee Linda Tripp to tape record all of her conversations with Monica Lewinsky and then to bring those tapes to Kenneth Starr. This was, by the way,

illegal.

What made conspiracies the bread-and-butter of the last decade of the 20th century? Perhaps it was the popularity of 1991's Oliver Stone film, *JFK*. After that film, a poll reported that 70 percent of Americans believed a conspiracy was behind Kennedy's murder.

The government tried to address the issue. The JFK Records Collection Act of 1992 passed Congress in October of 1992 and established an independent Assassinations Record Review Board. In 1996, President Clinton signed the Electronic Freedom of Information Act Amendments as an attempt to increase transparency in government. Neither act had much impact, however, or slowed the rate of conspiracy theories.

On television, Chris Carter's *The X-Files* was the first production to pick up on the conspiracy fever of the nineties. The series posited a secret cabal, the Syndicate, conducting— from deep within the Federal Government— dangerous tests on American citizens. It was these tests that were responsible for the "abduction" experience in many cases.

In the horror film, conspiracies cropped up frequently. The Catholic Church was pinpointed as a villain in *John Carpenter's Vampires* (1998) and the Vatican was the target of *Stigmata* (1999). In the former, a cardinal forged a secret alliance with the unholy undead so as to become immortal. In the latter, the Church had buried a secret Gospel and had enacted a conspiracy to keep its anti-Church message a secret. A modern American woman played by Patricia Arquette became "possessed" by a spirit intent on revealing the truth.

The ultra-rich were often depicted as the conspirators in 1990s horror film, which again seems appropriate since the top 1 percent of the country owned 40 percent of the nation's financial treasure. In *The Texas Chain saw Massacre: The Next Generation* (1994), it was learned that Leatherface and his (new) family were employed by a secret illuminati preying on the innocent. Likewise, the Stephen Norrington film *Blade* posited that a Vampire Nation lived in secret among humans, buying up real estate, forging back-room deals with human politicians and accumulating wealth in their offshore accounts.

The secret cabal featured in Stanley Kubrick's final film *Eyes Wide Shut* was metaphorically vampiric: leeching off the lower strata of society and employing them to serve as sex and music workers in their clandestine, sinister, secret orgies. Similarly, Roman Polanski's film noir *The Ninth Gate* (1999) hinted at the existence of a conspiracy of Satanists made up of sports figures, celebrities and the ultrawealthy.

Government conspiracies involving aliens appeared in *X-tro 3*:

Watch the Skies (1995), *The Arrival* (1996) and *The X-Files: Fight the Future* (1998). *The X-Files* movie assembled a sort of "grand unified theory of conspiracies," tying together the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma to organizations such as FEMA as well as alien invasion, and the spread of an insidious, transgenic crop. Amazingly, all the pieces of that conspiracy fit together perfectly, and present an "alternate" history of life in America in the 1990s.

With so many conspiracies cropping up in horror movies of the 1990s, the message was clear: *trust no one!*

I'm Going to Make You Learn about Loss: The Interloper as 1990s Boogeyman

One of the most common boogeymen featured in 1990s horror films is the dreaded "Interloper." This invading villain may be defined as a person (and often a woman) who deliberately interferes with the affairs of another, or who trespasses into a place, situation or activity without permission or invite.

That situation may be family life (*The Guardian* [1990], *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* [1992]). The location may be the workplace (*The Temp* [1993], *The Crush* [1993], *Mother's Boys* [1994]). And the activity might be a family vacation (*The River Wild* [1994]). The excellent horror blog Kindertrauma has also suggested the term "Usurper" (meaning to seize another's place) in regards to this particular movie villain. In the 1990s, the interloper was by no means a character limited to the cinema. On the contrary, the decade featured a number of notorious interlopers who brought ruin, humiliation and even death to those whose attention they coveted.

Celebrities were among the prime targets. "The Queen of Tejano Music," Mexican-American singing sensation Selena, was one such target, murdered in 1993 by the president of her fan club, Yolanda Saldivar, a trained nurse and reputedly a lesbian.

Similarly, a fan of tennis player Steffi Graf named Gunter Pache attacked the sport figure's primary competitor, Monica Seles, with a boning knife in Hamburg, Germany, also in 1993. His mission: to return Graf to her number one ranking in the sport. Stabbed between the shoulder blades, a rattled Seles did not return to professional tennis for two years. Robert De Niro played a similarly obsessed baseball fan in the Tony Scott film *The Fan* (1996).

Interlopers were not simply insane fans, however. They were also domestics, like nannies. One famous 1990s interloper was Louise

Woodward, a 19-year-old au pair from England who was responsible for the "shaken baby syndrome" death of her eight month old ward, Matthew Eappen. The 1990s horror cinema brought us at least two Interloping nannies: the druid-worshipper of William Friedkin's *The Guardian* (1990) and Rebecca De Mornay's intruder in *The Hand That Rocked the Cradle* (1992).

Perhaps the decade's most famous interloper was a White House intern named Monica Lewinsky who set her sights on the most powerful man in America: President Bill Clinton. Although Clinton was inarguably foolish and reckless to become sexually involved with a 24-year-old intern, Lewinsky had in fact gone to Washington, D.C., with the intent to snare him.

According to her friend Kathy Bleiler, Lewinsky had informed her in 1992 that she was going to the White House to acquire her "presidential kneepads,"⁶ a veiled reference to fellatio, and evidence that a sexual relationship had been on her mind for some time.

Lewinsky nearly brought down the Bill Clinton presidency, and Clinton himself played a big part in his near downfall. That idea itself is actually a part of the interloper mystique. The victim of the Interloper often brings on the invasion him- or herself, either through sexual infidelity or an unwise lowering of personal and professional barriers.



The interloper personified: The Dark Nanny, Camilla (Jennifer Seagrove) shatters domestic and moral boundaries in William Friedkin's *The Guardian* (1990).

In Single White Female (1992), Allie (Bridget Fonda) unwittingly invites an incursion by the unstable Hedy (Jennifer Jason Leigh) by trying on her earrings, spying on her in the bathtub while Hedy masturbates, and sharing the private details of her personal life.



Monica Lewinsky: Real life 1990s interloper or victim of abuse of power?

In *Cape Fear* (1991) from Martin Scorsese, the interloper Max Cady (Robert De Niro) is enraged by his target Sam Bowden's (Nick Nolte) unethical and unprofessional behavior as a lawyer.

Other real-life interlopers in the 1990s included Tonya Harding, who with her husband Jeff Gooloolly colluded to injure a professional competitor, figure skater Nancy Kerrigan. Then there was Amy Fisher, "The Long Island Lolita," who shot Mary Jo Buttafuoco, the wife of her illicit lover, Joey Buttafuoco.

Another interloper was Mary Kay Letourneau, who shattered the confines of the teacher-pupil relationship to engage in sexual relations with a twelve-year-old student, Vili Fualaau. The married Letourneau was charged with statutory rape, but nonetheless mothered Fualaau's child.

Looking over the 1990s list of real life interlopers, from Amy Fisher to Louise Woodward to Mary Kay Letourneau and Monica Lewinsky, one can detect, in several cases, how trust was too quickly established, then misplaced, and how intimacy with an unstable person can lead to personal ruin and public infamy.

Why was this kind of thing such a phenomenon of the 1990s? Perhaps it wasn't. Perhaps it was only *reported more heavily* in the 1990s, in the new age of 24-hour cable television and daytime talk shows. The media beast had to be fed, and it was a ferocious devourer of material.

But for whatever reason, the idea of the interloper had real currency in the decade of Clinton. The specter of a young, under-age woman attempting to seduce an established, adult man appeared in films such as *Poison Ivy* (1992) and *The Crush* (1993). A mother violated the boundaries of family in *Mother's Boys* (1994), and a temporary worker used sex and violence for upward mobility in *The Temp* (1993). Even an interloping pet dog got into the act in 1993's *Man's Best Friend*.

The popularity of interlopers as women scorned in American horror cinema was prompted by one very successful film, Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction* (1987), which depicted a jilted female lover (Glenn Close) going after a husband and his family with a butcher knife. The plethora of women interlopers in the 1990s followed suit, and many social critics felt that this negative portrayal of women represented a backlash against second wave feminism. Scholars Susan Lord and Annette Burfoot evenhandedly described the female interlopers of the 1990s as "manipulative and violent females who threaten or take the lives of men and other women but whose beauty and charm masks their evil nature."⁷

Author Mara Raha took a more severe approach, and labeled these interlopers as "insane vamps." She noted:

Hollywood tossed one seductive, crazed woman after another onto a witch burning pyre. Most of these films weren't as successful as *Fatal Attraction*, but for five years after that movie was released, celluloid's single women spent much of the time marring otherwise happy families, without other complex female roles to balance them out.⁸

In fairness, it should probably be noted here that many great female roles in the 1990s *did* balance out this portrayal of women as the psychotic boogymen of the decade.

Sigourney Weaver's Ripley in *Alien3* (1992) and *Alien Resurrection* (1997), Jodie Foster's Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs*, Holly Hunter's detective in *Copycat* (1995) and even Kristy Swanson's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992) are just a few strong, heroic female characters populating 1990s horror films.

And rather than being some kind of albatross, the Interloper roles actually enabled talented actresses like Jennifer Jason Leigh and Drew Barrymore to play strongly-written villainous roles. This was something that had not happened much in the 1980s, pre- *Fatal Attraction*. In fact, how many famous female slashers of the 1980s are there? The answer is: *none*. Those guys were all named Michael, Jason, Freddy or Chucky. So the 1990s role of the interloper actually repaired an existing gulf and, in the spirit of equality, let the women do the hacking too.

But completely unlike the male slashers of the 1990s, these women were out for vengeance. In one way or another, they had been wronged or slighted. Again, that's far more motivation than afforded either Michael Myers or Jason Voorhees.

Also it isn't as though it was exclusively women who did the interloping in these nineties films. Robert De Niro was the King of male interlopers, menacing innocents in *Cape Fear* and *The Fan*, but Michael Keaton in *Pacific Heights* (1990), Kevin Bacon in *The River Wild* (1994) and Mark Wahlberg in *Fear* (1996) also took their turn at cinematic stalking.

The interlopers of 1990s horror cinema, like the slashers before them, are governed by a specific paradigm, a collection of rules and conventions that define the category. In the interest of dissecting the form to its fullest, let's look at the Interloper paradigm.

CONVENTION 1: WE'RE ALL ACCOUNTABLE

In the interloper horror film, a hero or heroine is "good," but also flawed in some important way. In other words, the hero commits an act, usually a moral transgression of some type that "sparks" the activities or interest of the Interloper.

In *Cape Fear*, Sam breaks the law. In *Single White Female*, Allie invades Hedy's personal space. In *Pacific Heights*, yuppie landlords played by Melanie Griffith and Matthew Modine "fudge the numbers" to get a mortgage, then don't get an accurate credit check on interloper Carter Hayes (Michael Keaton) before renting to him.

In *Poison Ivy* (1992), a family values conservative talk-show host played by Tom Skerritt has sex with a friend of his daughter, the underage Lolita, Ivy (Drew Barrymore). In *The Crush*, writer Nick Eliot (Cary Elwes) allows a girl with a crush on him to kiss him and proofread his work for a magazine.

And in *The Fan*, baseball player Bobby Rayburn (Wesley Snipes) is glad to take the advice of baseball fan Gil Renard (Robert De Niro).

The idea underlining this convention is simple. In a world where we no longer have a tradition of being well-acquainted with our neighbors, we invite in "strangers" at our own peril.

More so, our actions, if not carefully considered, might be construed as hostile or negative. In putting our interests first, as is the yuppie way, we're also putting someone else's interests second, and that was never acknowledged in the excessive "we can have it all" 1980s.

CONVENTION 2: WHAT'S YOUR CHILDHOOD TRAUMA?

Virtually every interloper featured in 1990s horror cinema has a psychologically based motive for their crimes, often childhood tragedies or traumas carried into adulthood. In this way, the interlopers enact a diagnosable evil, unlike say, Michael Myers, who is actually The Shape, the Boogeyman, something just barely recognizable as human.

In *Cape Fear*, Max Cady grew up with a Pentecostal, snake-handler father and in a stew of religious hatred and Old Testament-style justice, a background that influences his brand of revenge in the film.



The roommate from Hell. Jennifer Jason Leigh (right) puts a warning hand on Bridget Fonda in *Single White Female* (1991).

In *Single White Female*, Hedy's twin sister drowned at a family picnic when she was nine years old, and now Hedy seeks completeness, seeking her "missing" half in strangers like Allie.

In *Mother's Boys*, Judith (Jamie Lee Curtis) suffered a childhood trauma too. She saw her father jump to his death, committing suicide, and thereby abandoning her. In adulthood, Judith abandons her children, but then comes back to reclaim them, something she wishes her father might have done.

The interlopers in these films aren't inexplicable manifestations of spiritual evil, like demons or vampires, but rather products of inadequate nurture; wounded human beings who have carried their scars into the public square and now go about "scarring" others. These are wronged men and women, and they're not going to take it anymore.

CONVENTION 3:
BIG PROBLEMS START SMALL

The transgressions of the interlopers in 1990s horror films almost universally start small. Their little crimes, which eventually lead to bigger crimes, usually start with one of two types, either the destruction of material possessions or treatment of the victim's pet.

A hero in an interloper movie often first realizes that he is in for it when his car is vandalized. In *The Crush*, a rejected Adrian scratches the word "cocksucker" onto the hood of Nick's classic car, his Valiant. In *Mother's Boys*, Judith takes revenge upon the new maternal influence in her boys' life, Dad's girlfriend, by painting the word "whore" on the side of her Volvo. The car also figures in *Fear*, in the battle for dominance between David (Mark Wahlberg) and William Peterson's patriarch.

The other crime presaging full-scale calamity is the assault on the family pet. In *Cape Fear*, *Single White Female*, *Man's Best Friend* (1993), and *The River Wild*, the attack against a pet signals that worse transgressions are to come. Once the loyal pet is gone, the Interloper is ready to go further.

CONVENTION 4: YOUR LIFE IS UP FOR GRABS

Since the interloper has gotten privileged access to the life and livelihood of his victims, every aspect of that life is ultimately threatened by these boogeymen. Professional reputation is imperiled deliberately in *The Temp* (1993), *The Crush* (1993) and *Mother's Boys* (1994).

Parent's relationships with their children are often damaged by interlopers, in films including *Cape Fear* (1991), *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992), *Poison Ivy* (1992), *The River Wild* (1994) and *The Fan* (1996). At first, the interloper is cool, offering to trade secrets with the child (*The River Wild*) or let children do something they know they're not supposed to do, like watch a scary movie (*The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*).

Even identity itself is at risk. Hedy wants nothing less than to become Allie in *Single White Female*, cutting her hair like Allie's and appropriating her name and wardrobe. Ivy murders the matriarch of her victim family, so she can become "the mother figure" in *Poison Ivy*. Once more, this convention plays on a very real 1990s fear: *identity theft*.

There are a number of other conventions in these films. Interlopers often use an alias, to make it harder to track down their

past.

Another convention is that non-whites tend to get thrown under the bus when the situation gets bad. The retarded black housekeeper of *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* gets fired, for instance, after being framed by the Interloper. Then there's the black would-be tenant and Korean tenants of *Pacific Heights*, who are secondary victims of interloper Carter Hayes' assault on his landlords.

And finally, all attempts at police intervention in these films are utter failures. Victims must take care of interlopers without benefit of help from authority. They got themselves into this mess (at least partially) and so, the movies insist, they must extricate themselves too. Once more, this seems to be a timely 1990s lesson: the best way to negate victimhood is to stand-up for yourself, and fight for your rights.



His upward mobility is on her mind. Kris Bolin (Lara Flynn Boyle, left) has got the paranoid Peter Derns (Timothy Hutton) exactly where she wants him in *The Temp*, 1993.

Quid Pro Quo: The Serial Killer as Boogeyman of the 1990s

The faceless slasher of the 1980s became the interloper, the personal demon of the 1990s. But the slasher also became another cinematic monster: the serial killer. In many ways, the serial killer is actually the monster most associated with the Age of Clinton.

A serial killer is defined as a person who has murdered at least three people and done so according to some internal clock or schedule. Serial killers tend to be extremely intelligent, and, like the interlopers, boast a history of instability or trauma at home. Serial killers were often abused as children, though not always. In addition, many serial killers also began their reign of terror by hurting small animals, another commonality with cinematic interlopers.



He didn't rent to the black man. Yuppie Drake Goodman (Matthew Modine, left) has no one to blame but himself after renting to an evil white interloper instead of the trustworthy Lou Baker (Carl Lumbly) in *Pacific Heights* (1990).

The late 1980s and 1990s saw the rise and fall of many prominent, real life serial killers. Ted Bundy, who killed more than thirty people, was executed by the state of Florida in 1989. Aileen Wournos, a female serial killer, was apprehended by police in 1990. Another serial killer, Charles Albright, murdered several prostitutes in

Dallas in 1991 before his capture.

The most famous serial killer of the decade was Jeffrey Dahmer (1960–1991), who murdered seventeen boys between the years 1978 and 1991. Dahmer's bizarre and heinous crimes involved not just murder, but rape and cannibalism too. For a time, he even sought to turn his victims into "zombies" by drilling holes in their head and injecting hydrochloric acid into the brain. Dahmer was also famous for keeping a human heart stored in his refrigerator. After his capture and trial, Dahmer was sentenced to 957 years in prison. He was killed by a fellow inmate in 1991.

By the widely accepted definition, Ted Kaczynski, "The Unabomber," was also a serial killer, since he plotted the elaborate deaths of victims all across America according to his own schedule and unique point of view. In Kaczynski's case, he had a political motive for killing. He wrote an anti-industry, anti-technology manifesto demanding a return to nature.

In a strange case of synchronicity, the rise of the 1990s serial killer coincided with an increased national fixation on the science of forensic pathology. This was due in part to the best-selling works of author Patricia Cornwell, a medical examiner in Richmond. She penned the Kay Scarpetta books, with titles such as *Post-Mortem* (1990), *Body of Evidence* (1991) and *All That Remains* (1992). Cornwell focused on a new kind of detective, one who could scour a victim's corpse and pinpoint the identity of the killer based on skin or hair fragments, semen samples, or DNA evidence.

Also in 1990, a popular TV series, *Law & Order* (1990–2010), premiered, and it focused on the investigation, arrest and trial of criminals, heightening our fascination with police work and America's system of justice. Later genre programs like Chris Carter's *The X-Files* and Carter's follow-up, *Millennium*, often focused on serial killer investigations, using a combination of behavioral psychology and forensic pathology to track the killer down.

The most prominent, charismatic serial killer of 1990s arrived early, in 1991. Hannibal Lecter, as played by Anthony Hopkins in *The Silence of the Lambs*, became the prototype for much of the horror that followed in the decade. He was evil, and he was brilliant, to crib a quotation from *Basic Instinct*.

Lecter understood human psychology, had an appreciation for fine arts and gourmet foods, and was a cannibal. And as both a psychiatrist and a psychologist, Lecter was in the rare position of being able to diagnose and explain his own kind, his own serial killer breed. *The Silence of the Lambs* also featured another serial killer, Ted

Levine's Buffalo Bill, a man sewing a new body out of human skin so he could transcend his sex. But audiences remember Lecter with the most clarity, especially the scene in which he engineers his brutal escape from captivity and is loosed upon the world at large.

The next famous serial killer of the 1990s might not have been a killer at all. Catherine Trammell (Sharon Stone) in *Basic Instinct* had a knack for being tangentially involved in crimes related to her novels, written under the predatory *nom-de-plume*, Catherine Woolf. Catherine was either in the wrong place at the wrong time, or she was a swaggering, loquacious, sexy, ice-pick wielding psychopath. As much as Hopkins quickly became identified as Lecter, Stone instantly became a star as Trammell.

Another trait in common: both Lecter and Trammell love to talk, love the verbal dance and hold a mesmerizing sway over their wouldbe victims that involves much more than the mere threat of physical violence.

These are celebrity monsters, high-profile predators and they know it.

Films such as *Jennifer 8* (1992), *Blink* (1994), *Copycat* (1995), *Kiss the Girls* (1997) and *The Bone Collector* (1999) didn't stray far from serial killer reality, offering as villains a variety of true-crime killers. These monsters went by nicknames, just like Buffalo Bill, and each orchestrated a series of crimes based on some unfulfilled personal need.

In *Copycat* the killer, Peter Kurtan, wanted to be famous, on a par with killers like the Son of Sam and The Zodiac, whom he worshipped.

Casanova in *Kiss the Girls* believed he had great love to give the right woman, but only by force would his captive women accept that great love.

In *The Bone Collector*, the killer was out for revenge against a cop who hurt him, pure and simple.

Se7en was a different story altogether. The landmark film by director David Fincher went to elaborate detail to depict a "fallen," timeless metropolis, one where sin was so commonplace that it had become cheap and meaningless. The serial killer in this film, John Doe (Kevin Spacey), makes murder a work of performance art by killing each of his victims using a means appropriate to the deadly sin they were guilty of committing. John Doe is a self-important, religious fanatic in *Se7en* who believes he is teaching society a valuable lesson.

A 1999 serial killer film, *Resurrection*, directed by Russell Mulcahy, followed *Se7en*'s example and featured a serial killer

assembling body parts so as to remake the body of Christ himself.

In the 1990s, serial killers also became larger than life figures not just through their charismatic personalities (Lecter, Trammell), or through their egregious, larger-than-life crimes (*Se7en*, *Resurrection*) but through distinctly supernatural means as well.

In *The Exorcist III* (1990), *The First Power* (1990), *976-Evil 2* (1991), *Ghost in the Machine* (1993), *Pinocchio's Revenge* (1996), *Fallen* (1998) and even the *Child's Play* sequels, serial killers were resurrected from beyond the grave to continue their acts of terror. Upon return, they could command the powers of the Devil, astrally-project themselves, travel through computer worlds, and even, on occasion, hop from human body to human body.

The futuristic horror *Split Second* (1992) imagined an alien/monster/Satanist serial killer on the loose in global warming-ravaged 2008 London, ripping out human hearts as bloody sacrifices to the Devil.

One of the most intriguing serial killers of the 1990s was an urban legend brought to life by the "belief " of scared victims. Candyman (Tony Todd) was a killer with a hook for a hand, used to cut his victims from "groin to gullet." Candyman appeared in three franchise films, embodying the "spirit" of fear in the decade.

The 1995 movie *Virtuosity* was a variation on the super-powered serial killer of the nineties. It featured a virtual reality simulation, Sid 6.7 (Russell Crowe) who escaped into the real world and began to kill people. His programming made him a summation of all the great murderers and serial killers in history, including John Wayne Gacy, Charles Manson, Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein.

Even the weirdest of these serial killers, the supernatural and high-tech examples of the 1990s boogeyman, were always hunted by law enforcement and their stories vetted in the format of the police procedural.

It was the clichés of the police procedural/ serial killer form that ultimately killed this boogeyman at the cinema. The same details were repeated so often that it became almost comical. Just as the slashers, or "knife kill" movies of the 1980s had burned themselves out, so did the serial killer film fall by the end of the 1990s.

In the serial killer/police procedural format, there are several conventions almost uniformly repeated. The first is that the film's hero, a law enforcement official, has faced a tragedy in the past and is trying desperately to get over it. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Clarice is still torn up over her upbringing and the death of her sheriff father. In

Copycat, Dr. Hudson (Sigourney Weaver) has become an agoraphobic after a deadly, near-fatal conflict with a serial killer. In *Virtuosity*, Denzel Washington's detective became involved with a serial killer who killed his entire family. In *Switchback*, Dennis Quaid's F.B.I. agent has seen his son abducted by a serial killer and is desperate to find him. In *Resurrection*, the son of the cop played by Christopher Lambert has died tragically in an accident involving a bicycle and traffic.

The point here is that our "heroes" carry baggage but, in an affirmation of the human spirit, will overcome that baggage to put away "a monster."

All serial killer films also feature entrenched, bureaucratic roadblocks to any attempt to catch the bad guys. Those impediments are embodied by one character type, which critic Roger Ebert identified as the "wrong-headed" superior, the police captain who, no matter what, makes the wrong call at the wrong time, thus jeopardizing the heroic cop/agent's ability to solve the case and catch the serial killer.

The wrong-headed superior appears in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Anthony Heald's Chilton), as a fame-seeking warden at Lecter's prison, in *Basic Instinct* (Chelcie Ross), in *Se7en* (R. Lee Ermy), in *Jennifer 8* (Kevin Conway), in *Fallen* (Donald Sutherland), in *The Bone Collector* (Michael Rooker) and just about every other serial killer film one can name. Almost universally, the wrong-headed superior takes the agent or detective off the case, just as it is about to break wide open.

Another serial killer movie cliché is the killer's shrine, which consists entirely of his newspaper clippings. These clippings make for a record of his activity and stand as a testament to his fame. They also might be used as evidence against him, as was the case with Beth Garner in *Basic Instinct*.

Other serial killer films highlight the connection between law enforcement officials and killers. Sometimes the connection is psychic, as is the case in *Fear* (1990). And sometimes the crazed lunatic leaves behind handwritten messages in human blood to taunt his pursuer. This particular contrivance appears in such films as *Fear*, *The First Power*, and *Split Second*.

Fairy Tales Can Come True, It Can Happen to You: The 1990s Grim Fairy Tale

One of the oddest trends in the genre during the 1990s involved

the depiction of strange monsters and mythical beasts on the silver screen, ones that had originated in historic fairy tales, or other notable works of folklore. If the slasher movie paradigm of the 1980s had split off and given birth to both the anti-social serial killers and interlopers of the 1990s, then there is a corollary for the "Grim Fairy Tales."

In the late 1980s, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* initiated the trend of "Rubber Reality" horror, a term coined by director Wes Craven which meant, simply, the ascent of monsters and demons (like Freddy and Pinhead) who didn't simply kill their prey, but in many instances, actually re-shaped the world around them. Rubber reality monsters dwelled in dreams and alternate dimensions (such as Hell), and generally were far more powerful than their slasher brethren. Horror films of the rubber reality type tended to be of a supernatural bent and featured more overt fantasy elements than the films of the 1980s slasher movement. They were also more expensive to make.

In the 1990s, the rubber reality monsters transformed into powerful folkloric entities who came replete with a catalogue of weaknesses, strengths, idiosyncrasies and powers straight from oral and written traditions. The decade offered a literal global smorgasbord, an international sampler of such monsters.

Why did folklore boogeyman find such purchase in the American horror cinema of 1990s? It's possible that the United States' relative youth and lack of cultural mythology created a craving for such stories. The 1990s grim fairy tales constructed new legends on the ashes of old.

This may also explain why so many horror "westerns"— *Grim Prairie Tales* (1990), *Sundown: The Vampire in Retreat* (1991), and *Breakdown* (1997) to name three—were released during the years 1990–1999. In the new high-tech age, audiences were seeking some re-connection with history, with comforting old myths.

Through these monsters rampaging through our nation, the people of 1990s America became "interconnected" with the histories and dreads of other lands and other time periods.

In general, however, grim fairy tale movies quickly proved the campiest and most insubstantial of all the 1990s horror films, featuring wisecracking monsters who commit egregious acts of violence in stylized, humorous fashion. No shades of gray here. Just lots of Freddy Krueger-styled quips and fantasy-land murder scenarios.

Leprechaun (1993) was an early representative of the form, starring Jennifer Aniston, and it highlighted the nasty exploits of a diminutive quip-spouting boogeyman in green, played by Warwick

Davis. The Mark Jones film plumbed the Irish legend of the "Leipreachán" by connecting the villain to his "pot of gold" (the object of his quest) and focusing on such mythological aspects of the creature as his interest in mending and making shoes. Unlike the myth, however, the leprechaun of the film series, which ultimately came to include three equally lackluster sequels in the 1990s, was decidedly evil—far less ambiguous in nature than Irish folklore suggests. For his follow-up production, the director of *Leprechaun*, Mark Jones, tackled another grim fairy tale, this time the German-based *Rumpelstiltskin* (1996), starring Max Grodenchik as a baby-stealing sprite.



Warwick Davis portrays the malevolent leprechaun, a grim fairy tale come to life, in Vidmark Entertainment's *Leprechaun 4 in Space* (1996).

In 1992, *The Runestone* also based its tale of a mini-apocalypse called "Ragnarok" on fairy tales and myth, particularly of Norse origination. The film's narrative involved the escape of a monster wolf, Fenrir, from captivity and the subsequent awakening of his nemesis, a reincarnated hero and warrior named Tyr. Though featuring a goofy-looking monster suit, *The Runestone* accurately reflected many of the details of Norse epic and heroic lore.

Pumpkinhead 2: Blood Wings (1994) picked up on the rural, Appalachian setting of *Pumpkinhead* (1989). In both cases, a demon of vengeance originated with a poem, and it is quoted at length in *Blood Wings*.

Two films, *Sleepstalker: The Sandman's Last Rites* (1995) and *The Sandman* (1996), involved a folkloric character beloved by children for generations. This character is known for sprinkling dust or sand in the eyes of babes to help them go to sleep at nights. In true horror tradition, however, the movies seemed inspired by E.T.A. Hoffman's 1816 work, *Der Sandmann*, which put a malevolent, grotesque spin on the character.

Snow White: A Tale of Terror drew inspiration not just from the popular Disney film, but from the Brothers Grimm version of *Schneewittchen*. The 1997 film re-cast the beloved fairy tale into a horror film preoccupied with issues of mortality and shattered family bonds. It almost seemed like a period interloper film, with snow *blood red* to go with snow white.

From Arabic and the Qu'ran came *Wes Craven: Presents Wishmaster* (1997), the story of a villainous djinni or "Genie" (Andrew Divoff) hoping to escape his captivity in a parallel universe. Like the djinnis of Islam, this monster was untrustworthy, tricking humans into their doom. An underwhelming direct-to-video sequel, *Wishmaster 2: Evil Never Dies*, followed in 1999.

Other films of the grim fairy tale variety featured more distinctly Americanized boogeymen. *The Ice Cream Man* imagined a Bad Humor Man of the black-and-white Eisenhower 1950s on the prowl in the 1990s, serving up terror from his neighborhood truck. The movie's screenplay compared this villain explicitly to the Pied Piper (another fairy tale character with a dark history). Clint Howard played the titular role in gleeful, maniacal fashion, enthusiastically scooping up rocky road ice cream that was made with human eyeballs.

Other examples of the grim fairy tale included the two Jacks: *Jack-O* (1995) and *Jack Frost* (1997). Both Jacks were connected to holidays: Jack-O to the jack-o-lanterns of Halloween, and the snowman Jack Frost to the season of Christmas.

And then there was William Lustig's *Uncle Sam* (1997), which recast the patriotic American symbol of nationalism, "Uncle Sam," as a rampaging murderer, killing all those who don't subscribe to his view of patriotism.

Another sort of grim fairy tale come to life in 1990s horror was the American "urban legend," depicted in films such as the aforementioned *Candyman* (1992), both iterations of *Campfire Tales* (1991 and 1997), and, of course, *Urban Legend*. These films didn't necessarily feature a fairy tale monster (though *Campfire Tales* offered a terrifying specter called Satan Claus), but they did serve as cautionary, didactic stories about the foibles of human nature.

Very few of these grim fairy tale efforts found widespread popularity among mass audiences or even modest critical success, at least beyond the *Leprechaun* and *Candyman* films, and many efforts of this subgenre were released directly-to-video ... dumped, as it were, onto the secondary market.

If You Were the Only Suspect in a Senseless Bloodbath— Would You Be Standing in the Horror Section? The Slasher Revival

By the mid-1990s, there was nostalgia in some circles for the slasher films of the early 1980s. For all their linear plotting, cardboard characters and repetitious sequels, at least those slasher films were scary. In comparison with big-budget, overblown, non-scary horror movies like *Interview with a Vampire* (1994) and *Wolf* (1994), the simplicity and efficiency of the slasher film looked mighty appealing.

Writer Kevin Williamson resurrected the slasher format unexpectedly with his inventive, self-referential screenplay, originally titled *Scary Movie*, but known upon release as *Scream*. Directed by Wes Craven, *Scream* featured an old school slasher, Ghost Face, picking off cynical teen characters of the 1990s. The most important thing about *Scream*, however, was that it was scary. The first sequence, involving Drew Barrymore's battle with Ghost Face in a house alone at night, was not only clever and self-referential, it was downright terrifying. The first view of the villain was electric, a reckoning with something unexpected and disturbing.



Wrong number: Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell, left) dials up horror, while her best friend Tatum (Rose McGowan) listens, in Wes Craven's Slasher movie revival, *Scream* (1996).

The rest of *Scream* didn't disappoint either, offering surprise twists and some visceral gut punches. The film's resolution revealed that Ghost Face was not just one killer, but two teenage boys working in tandem. They were inspired to act in this murderous fashion by their love of horror movies.

Shot in and around scenic, affluent Santa Rosa, *Scream* cost only fourteen million dollars to produce and grossed well over one-hundred million dollars during an amazing six month engagement in theaters. Critics praised the cleverness of the film, and audiences ate it up, in large part because it was such a novel experience to be scared at a movie theater again. *Scream* won the MTV Movie of the Year Award in 1996 (edging out *Independence Day*) and the film's success almost immediately prompted a sequel, *Scream 2*.

Craven and Williamson returned with the cast from *Scream* for the sequel, which shot in Georgia for fifty-two days, in part on the lovely gothic campus of Agnes Scott College.

Scream 2 played merrily on the conventions of "the sequel," which included such rules as "carnage candy," which dictates that the death scenes had to be more elaborate and more numerous than in the

original. *Scream 2* opened on December 12, 1997, and like its predecessor was a huge smash, with a sequel, *Scream 3*, following in the year 2000.

Kevin Williamson initiated another slasher revival franchise in 1997, beginning with *I Know What You Did Last Summer*. This film followed four teens played by Jennifer Love Hewitt, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Freddie Prinze, Jr., and Ryan Phillippe who, after a moral lapse and agreement to keep it secret, were tormented and stalked by a serial killer with a hook, the fearsome Fisherman. Unlike *Scream*, the film wasn't quite so self-referential but it again captured an element of the teen culture of the 1990s—the belief, perhaps, that actions don't have consequences. A less-than-stellar sequel followed in 1998, entitled *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer*.

Urban Legend (1998) was another entry in the slasher revival movement of the 1990s, with a series of killings on a college campus, all meted out by a mysterious killer in the style of famous urban legends.

These slasher revival films adopted all the overarching structure of the famous and oft-repeated slasher paradigm. They featured *organizing principles* (the hook on which to hang all the action), the *familiar character archetypes* (final girl, masked killer, cheerleader, jock, practical joker, and red herring), and *the expected gruesome set-pieces* (the transgression or crime in the past, the bloody *coup de grâce* and the sting in the tail/tale).



Julie (Jennifer Love Hewitt, left) and Helen (Sarah Michelle Gellar) share a deadly secret in the Columbia Pictures

slasher film, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997).



Randy (Jamie Kennedy, right) explains the rules of slasher sequels to Dewey (David Arquette) in Dimension Films' carnage candy sequel, *Scream 2* (1997).

But the slasher revival efforts added something new to the mix as well. They contextualized themselves in horror movie history and played with all the overly-familiar forms, spinning, up-ending and sometimes inverting them to authentically surprising effect. The parameters of the slasher films were already known when Williamson went to work on *Scream*, but he updated the form for the 1990s by playing with those parameters in new ways.

One element that differentiated the slasher revival from the original movement of the form involved "the talking killer." In the original slasher films, Jason, Michael and the other slashers never stopped to explain themselves or their actions. But in *Scream*, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and their sequels, and in *Urban Legend*, the final act often included a surprise unmasking of the villain, and a lengthy scene in which the killer would explain himself and his motives for his anti-social behavior.

Just as important, the characters featured in the slasher revival, though based on the old archetypes, had to be *smart*. They knew the rules of horror movies (like all good horror fans) and would even remark upon them. The downside to this trend, as some horror fans would attest, is that many horror films produced in the aftermath of

Scream, in the period 1996–1999 (including *Halloween H20*), had to sell themselves as "hip" and "funny" and be populated almost exclusively with very attractive twenty-year-old stars.

Those People You Killed? What Color Were They?— Race Relations

Apart from the 1960s, the 1990s is perhaps the most important decade of the 20th century in terms of race-relations in America. The span from 1990 to 1999 represented a period of great African American achievement in the country, and also a contentious time that proved, quite dramatically, how differently whites and blacks view the nation, its laws and its history.

In terms of achievement, many African American citizens rose to positions of great responsibility and import. In 1990, Douglas Wilder of Virginia became the nation's first African American governor. George Bush's nominee, Clarence Thomas, ascended to the Supreme Court, though only after a difficult confirmation process and accusations of sexism from a former employee, Anita Hill. Carol Moseley Braun became U.S. Senator from Illinois, serving from 1993 to 1999. Both Wilder and Braun made unsuccessful runs for the presidency in their later careers.

However, there were deeply troubling incidents in the 1990s that involved race relations too. On March 3, 1991, a 25-year-old black man, Rodney King, was detained by the LAPD for speeding. The policemen beat Mr. King savagely, and the entire incident was captured on amateur videotape, and then broadcast seemingly on a loop on CNN. The white police were charged with using excessive force, but on April 29, 1992, the four worst offenders were acquitted of any and all wrong-doing.

In response to this injustice, the worst civilian riot in American history erupted. Nearly 4,000 buildings were vandalized, thousands of local businesses were torched, and fifty three Americans died. A white trucker, Reginald Denny, was pulled from his vehicle and assaulted on live television.

Eventually, peace was restored to Los Angeles, but not before a gaping wound had been exposed for the entire world to see. The King beating and the riot afterwards created a ripple effect of race hatred. Rappers like Ice-T recorded songs about police brutality, including the infamous "Cop Killer." And on the far right, white supremacist candidates such as David Duke made legitimate runs at higher office, and in some cases nearly won.

Later in the decade, these wounds were reopened when the African American celebrity and former football hero O.J. Simpson was charged for the brutal murder of his white wife, Nicole Brown Simpson. Opinions about the ensuing circus trial were fiercely divided. By and large, whites were certain of Simpson's guilt, whereas many blacks were equally certain O.J. was being framed by racist cops, including detective Mark Fuhrman, who copped to using the word "nigger" on more than one occasion. Simpson was eventually acquitted, but his trial had, again, polarized race relations in America. He was a hero to some Americans, and a fugitive from the law, a murderer, to others.

President Clinton, who has sometimes been called America's "first black president," presented a largely centrist stance regarding race after he was elected. Before he was elected, Clinton made an appeal to white America by condemning the inflammatory statements of a black hip-hop artist, Sister Souljah. After the Los Angeles riots, Souljah had told the *Washington Post* that instead of black people killing black people, they should take a week to kill whites instead. Clinton repudiated Souljah's remark, revealing a distance from one of his core constituencies, and the instance became known, famously, as a "Sister Souljah" moment.

Once in office, Clinton undertook welfare reform, but in a largely empathetic manner, and argued passionately for the continuation and improvement of affirmative action, suggesting that the government "mend it," not "end it."

In the early 1990s, Hollywood produced a new wave of black films. It made good economic sense, since African Americans made up a whopping 25 percent of all movie audiences in America during the decade, and spent some two billion dollars annually on movie going.⁹ African American themed films including *House Party* (1990), *New Jack City* (1991), *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *Juice* (1992) and *Malcolm X* (1992) succeeded at the box office, and horror filmmakers were quick to exploit the trend. In 1990, James Bond III's *Def by Temptation* looked at the promiscuity of some urban African American men and recommended a return to the values of the Bible to defeat the evil of temptation, manifested in the film by a ravenous, seductive succubus (Cynthia Bond).

In 1991, Wes Craven's *The People Under the Stairs* looked at poverty and desperation in the urban black population and targeted Reaganomics as the root cause. The movie pitted an African American boy named Fool (Brandon Adams) against an insane white couple who lived in a fortress, and who, as renters of slums, had become extremely wealthy. In the last scene, the fortress was literally blown

up, with riches of gold raining down on the victorious community, an alternate, populist vision of "trickle down" economics in America.

Perhaps the most significant race-themed horror film of the decade was *Candyman* (1992), a film set in the "projects" of Cabrini-Green in Chicago. There, amidst violence, poverty, gangs and segregation, the black tenants spoke in hushed tones of a Black boogeyman named Candyman. A white graduate student Helen Lyle (Virginia Madsen) studied this new urban legend and learned Candyman's history. A hundred years earlier, in America's South, he was a painter, Daniel Robitaille, who dared to love a white aristocrat's daughter. He was punished for his crime (miscegenation), and had returned from the grave as a spectral avenger.

Tony Todd's *Candyman* quickly became one of the most popular and beloved screen slashers and boogeymen of the 1990s. Tony Todd felt that this boogeyman's story was, in fact, universal.

Audiences sympathize with Candyman. He's a black man who had this horrendous act of racism and prejudice committed against him for a universal right—to be able to love another human being. But in Robitaille's case, he committed a taboo act in the 1890s—he loved a white woman. The audience is able to relate to The Candyman because of their own knowledge of racism. Everyone's felt discrimination in some form.¹⁰

In the second film in the *Candyman* film, Bill Condon's *Farewell to the Flesh*, Candyman returned, this time seeking, if not reparations for bigotry, then at least an acknowledgment from his white family in New Orleans that he existed and was part of the "line." The film ended with a photograph of the painter, Daniel Robitaille—Candyman's human identity—taking his rightful place in the family album.

Also in 1995, Spike Lee and Rusty Cundieff presented an all-black horror anthology called *Tales from the Hood*. It consisted of several horror tales, all explicitly concerning issues of race. Commendably, the film was even-handed in its approach. Some stories looked at police brutality ("Rogue Cop Revelation") and white politicians using race as a wedge issue ("KKK Comeuppance") while other tales looked hard at violence against blacks perpetrated by other blacks ("Boys Do Get Bruised" and "Hardcore Convict.")



Tony Todd plays a serial killer from beyond the grave, the imposing "urban legend" Candyman.

John Carpenter's *Village of the Damned* (1995) also, at least obliquely, gazed at issues of race in America. Earth women were inseminated with alien children: platinum-haired, hive-minded creatures without compassion or emotion, a new breed. Much of the film involved the fear of Midwich's citizenry over these "different" kids. At one point in the film, Rodney King's famous plea for decency, "can't we all just get along?" was re-phrased as "can't we just live together?"

In 1998, Wesley Snipes starred in *Blade*, a comic-book-based

horror/action/superhero film about an African American warrior who was half human and half vampire. But Blade was an outcast from both races, considered literally an "Uncle Tom" by vampires like Deacon Frost (Stephen Dorff) and a target of the human establishment, particularly the Los Angeles police. *Blade* also involved the resurrection of a vampire God, La Magra, whose return would render moot all class and race distinctions among vampires.

By the end of the 1990s, perhaps because Clinton had proven so even-handed in dealing with racial issues, race was mostly off the table in horror movies. Fewer black-centric horror movies were being produced, and instead, prominent black hip-hop artists were integrated as supporting characters into many studio horror films of the day. L.L. Cool J. played crucial roles in *Halloween H20* (1998) and *Deep Blue Sea* (1999). Ice Cube starred in *Anaconda* (1997) and Queen Latifah showed up in Michael Crichton's *Sphere* (1998).

Finally, in the self-aware, post modern age of *Scream* and *Scream 2* (which featured Jada Pinkett in the Drew Barrymore, celebrity cameo role), African American characters were often reduced to discussing their less-than-likely chances of survival in the horror milieu. So much had changed. And so much was still the same.

Addicted to Evil: The New Vampires

One of the most notable concepts in horror films of the 1990s was the re-invention of old screen monsters; the re-purposing of old legends for a new era, a millennial flavor. The Grim Fairy Tales, with their folkloric villains, certainly lend credence to this notion. Even the slasher revival fits into the trend.

The monster most revisited and most reinterpreted in the 1990s was certainly the vampire. Film after film offered a new take on the blood-sucking undead.

Bram Stoker's Dracula, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, was actually a kind of bait-and-switch enterprise. On the surface, it promised a return to the original depiction of the vampire from the classic Stoker novel. But actually, the film transformed the Transylvanian count into a lovelorn hero who has become evil only because he lost the love of his life, Elisabeta. Importantly, that storyline does not occur at all in Stoker's work. It's an invention of the 1990s.

"I didn't see *Dracula* as a horror movie," reported Gary Oldman, echoing the stance of many actors and moviemakers in the 1990s. "I

saw it as a love story. It's Beauty and the Beast. It's so interesting to play someone who completely feeds off feminine energy. Blood has this symbolic role, from mythology, from the menstrual cycle—it's a sacred thing." ¹¹

Before the release of Coppola's film in 1992, many insiders were certain it would bomb, and some industry insiders even called it *Bonfire of the Vampires* after the notorious Brian De Palma flop, *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990). ¹²The naysayers were proven wrong, however, and *Bram Stoker's Dracula* earned a whopping \$32 million its opening weekend. The re-imagination of the vampire as eternal lover had worked.

Interview with a Vampire (1994) was based on the 1976 Anne Rice best-seller and followed largely the same path as Coppola's film, making its lead vampires, played by pretty boys Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt, sympathetic, even tragic figures. Eternity was a long time, and these Byronic philosophers moped and brooded handsomely about their existential dilemma. Once more the audience seemed to eat up the new interpretation of the vampire, as tortured soul.

Other 1990s vampire films selected the route of comedy. *Sundown: The Vampire in Retreat* (1991), *Innocent Blood* (1992), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992), Wes Craven's *Vampire in Brooklyn* (1995) and *Die Hard Dracula* (1998) all poked fun at the conventions of the longlived vampire horror film. The implication was that the monster, played for laughs, had outgrown his potency in the genre.

Contrarily, two of the best vampire films of the decade studied the vampire in relatively somber, austere terms. Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction* (1995) considered the famous monster in relation to mankind's addiction to evil. Vampirism was equated with wartime atrocities, as a graduate student Kathleen (Lili Taylor) sought to understand her new "curse." The film used philosophy, academia, and even, in a cameo by Christopher Walken, self-help platitudes, as a backdrop for the horror.

Immortality (1999), or *The Wisdom of Crocodiles*, starred Jude Law and suggested the vampire as an off-shoot of the human race; one with a reptilian brain and sense of emotional distance from his affairs. The vampire in the film, Steven (Law), needed not just blood, but the *blood of lovers* to thrive.

Two horror films of the 1990s, *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) and *John Carpenter's Vampires* (1998), adopted the unique strategy of pitting their heroes against a horde of vampires, which were portrayed in both productions as bottomfeeders, pack animals preying on humanity in out of the way desert locations (Mexico and the American

southwest). In previous generations, vampires had always been singular creatures possessed of great personal charm and hypnotic powers. The vampires in both these films were hissing, skuzzy low-lives, almost anonymous crack-house addicts reduced to pure adrenaline and appetite.

Filmmakers proved incredibly inventive in the 1990s, finding many new ways to interpret vampire myth. But in large part, there was the feeling that perhaps the vampire was getting long in the tooth. In the 2000s, the *Twilight* saga and *Let the Right One In* (2008) would find yet new directions for the old monster. So Dracula wasn't yet down for the count.

Submitted Out of Fear: The Teen Culture of the 1990s

Although few people realized it, the strange pattern of school-related violence in the 1990s was preceded by an incendiary case in 1989: a high school rape that occurred in the affluent, upper-class suburb of Glen Ridge, New Jersey.

Indeed, this rape occurred at the very high school this author personally attended, just one year after I had gone off to the University of Richmond. The students and personalities involved in the case were well-known to me. I had observed them, all "jocks," at Glen Ridge High for three years, and seen the blind adoration they aroused in parents, boosters, teachers, coaches, cheerleaders and other pillars of the community.

In March of 1989, a group of these celebrated football players lured a mentally-retarded girl with an I.Q. of 64 to one jock's basement. There, members of the team sodomized her with a broomstick and a baseball bat. By some accounts, they also forced her to commit acts of oral copulation. The athletes even allegedly planned to acquire a video camera and repeat the same crimes a day later ... for posterity. Fortunately, their behavior was discovered before it could be recorded.

In 1993, after a contentious, twenty-three week trial, three of the jocks that a jury assessed the most involved in the 1989 crime, Kevin Scherzer, Kyle Scherzer and Christopher Archer, were convicted on charges of sexually assaulting the girl. During the trial, their defense attorney used the so-called Lolita Defense to tar the young victim and protect the affluent, beloved athletes. The golden boys didn't go to jail until 1997 and ultimately were issued light sentences for their self-described "poor judgment." In Glen Ridge, many in the town rallied to the defense of the jocks at the time of the incident, arguing simply

that "boys will be boys." Others sought to bury the "incident," or make even make a "bad guy" of the whistleblower in the case.

As someone who observed the futurerapists and shared physical education classes with them, it was clear to me even as a teenager, and to many, many others too, that these kids were but swaggering time-bombs waiting to go off. They had been entitled—because of their athletic prowess—to believe they had to observe no limits, and brook no accounting with the law. And because of their well-connected, wealthy families, for the most part, that conceit was ultimately proven true.

But the incident bewildered a nation. These rapists had come from wealth, power, education, and opportunity. They had grown up with every conceivable advantage of the American way of life. And yet, in their first steps towards adulthood they committed an atrocity against a defenseless young girl—for no reason except it was fun to inflict pain on someone else. Someone who didn't have the same power they did.

The Glen Ridge case was but the tip of the iceberg in the 1990s.

In March of 1993, a group of eight jocks in Lakewood, California, were arrested for a competition in which they accrued points by having sexual intercourse—consensual or otherwise—with female high school students. Their victims were 14- and 15-year-old girls, and the boys, the self-named "Spur Posse," earned their points whether the girls wanted to have sex or, in their lingo, "submitted out of fear."

As in the case of the Glen Ridge rape, the school community rose up in defense of the athletes, not the victims, citing again the "boys will be boys" argument. When one of the Spur Posse, an 18-year-old, was charged with statutory rape, other students adorned T-shirts in support of him, their local hero.

In Rockdale, Georgia, in 1996, two hundred people were exposed to syphilis because of a teenage sex ring. Many of the females were under-age when they contracted the disease.

There were also at least twenty-five school shootings in the United States between the years 1990 and 1999. One such shooting occurred in Jonesboro, Arkansas, at Westside Middle School on September 24, 1998. Five victims were killed and ten people injured by two shooters: 13-year-old Mitchell Johnson and 11-year-old Andrew Golden. The boys were dressed in camouflage and had stolen their guns from Golden's grandfather's home. Today, both killers are free and legally able to buy firearms in America.

On Tuesday, April 20, 1999, in Littleton, Colorado, the most

famous school shooting in American history occurred at Columbine High School. Teenagers Dylan Harris and Eric Klebold killed thirteen people and injured twentyone before ultimately turning their weapons on themselves.

After the Columbine massacre, America's media blamed video games such as *Doom*, Goth culture, movies like *The Matrix* (1999) and *The Basketball Diaries* (1995), and the music of Marilyn Manson for the killings. The media did *not* blame easy access to firearms and ammunition, or uninvolved, absentee parents. Instead, news organizations invented a boogeyman for the occasion called *The Trench-Coat Mafia* ... even though, if there was one, it had nothing to do with Klebold and Harris. As author Dave Cullen wrote in his account of the tragedy:

The Trench-coat Mafia was mythologized because it was colorful, memorable, and fit the existing myth of the school shooter as outcast loner. All the Columbine myths worked that way. And they all sprang to life incredibly fast— most of the notorious myths took place before the killers' bodies were found.¹³

Whatever the root causes of the tragedy, the Columbine Massacre was a national disaster, and prompted a media-feeding frenzy.

Taken together, the Glen Ridge rape case, the Spur Posse, the sex ring in Georgia, the school shootings from Alaska and Arkansas to Colorado and Texas seem nothing less than a teen culture apocalypse. What was going on? How had the children of America's affluent middle class become the new "monsters" of the 1990s?

Several 1990s horror films considered this very question. The slasher revival *Scream* (1996) painted a picture of smart, extremely tech-savvy teens who—having been raised by the TV and tabloid television—seemed to have no sense of empathy. The killers in that film, Billy (Skeet Ulrich) and Stu (Matthew Lillard) were still kids; blissfully unaware how much it hurt to actually be stabbed in the gut. And when Stu realized he was going to be caught, he said, like an innocent child, that his mother is going to be "so mad." He had no idea of the scope of his violence.

Another 1996 film, *The Craft*, featured four ostracized high school students, all girls, who form an ad hoc witch coven, seeking spirituality in paganism. Once the teenagers are granted incredible supernatural powers, however, they use them to hypnotize boys, settle scores with cheerleaders, and otherwise dominate and bully their classmates in much the same way that they were bullied. The rules of high school thus remain the same, only the clique at the top of the food chain has changed.



These witches will not conform to society's rules in *The Craft*. But it sure is funny how they all dress alike. From left to right: Rachel True, Robin Tunney, Neve Campbell and Fairuza Balk.

In *Apt Pupil* (1998), an adaptation of Stephen King's short story, a boy, Todd Bowden (Brad Renfro) becomes obsessed with Nazi atrocities and befriends an old Nazi living in his neighborhood, Dussander (Ian McKellen). Like the shooters in *Columbine*, Todd is the product of a good education, strong family values and relative wealth, and yet he is a monster; a creature who thrives— *who gets off on*— tales of true life evil. The film never offers a reason why Todd is this way; he is simply a "weed" growing up in middle America, one who lacks a moral compass and again, the human quality of empathy. He is, perhaps, a serial killer in training, though the movie eschews the ending of King's story, in which Todd ends up being a spree murderer, just like the *Columbine* Killers.

In *Disturbing Behavior* (1998), parents and doctors in one small town feel they have solved the problem of school violence in modern America. They outfit their unwitting teens with a revved-up V-chip which prohibits swearing, premarital sex and other vices, and which simultaneously encourages love of "healthy" Boomer rock music and scholastic achievement. Now their teens wear letterman jackets, listen

to golden oldies and hang out at ice cream shops: a perfect return to the traditional values of the Eisenhower 1950s (and a reflection of the 1970s horror film, *The Stepford Wives*). The unimplanted teenagers of the same town rebel against the invasion of free will and individuality.

In *The Rage: Carrie 2* (1999), the sequel to Brian De Palma's *Carrie*, psychic teenage girl Rachel (Emily Bergl) sees her best friend commit suicide after being humiliated by a movie version of the Spur Posse. When Rachel comes to believe that she is their next victim, her telekinetic powers explode in a horrific display of violence mirroring the prom scene in the earlier film.

Two additional Kevin Williamson–penned films, 1998's *The Faculty* and 1999's *Teaching Mrs. Tingle* (titled *Killing Mrs. Tingle* before the Columbine Massacre), also considered the teen culture of the decade, identifying strongly with the average high school student's sense of powerlessness in the face of authority, represented by conformity-seeking teachers (really invading aliens) in *The Faculty*, and by one of the cruelest of the 1990s' talking monsters, Helen Mirren's bitter Mrs. Tingle.

Two other titles commented on the dark side of teen culture in the 1990s. In *Return of the Living Dead III* (1993), a girl named Julie (Mindy Clarke), who had become obsessed with "death," turned into a zombie wearing body piercings, a mini-skirt and combat boots. And in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992), the director recounted the last days of Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) before her murder. In this case, a history of abuse had turned the all-American girl and cheerleader into a promiscuous, drug-using woman, one who, like many American teens in the 1990s, was "fire walking" towards disaster.

Life Finds a Way: Science Run Amok

A tremendous number of horror films in the 1990s concerned themselves with the blazing and often uncomfortable pace of scientific advancement. In October of 1990, the Human Genome Project began mapping the DNA building blocks of humankind, and this was just the tip of the medical/scientific iceberg. In 1997, a sheep named Dolly was successfully cloned and many Americans began to wonder what new terrifying and blood-curdling monsters might emerge from this new scientific frontier. In many important ways, this Science Run Amok Era was analogous to the 1950s Atomic Era in horror films, reflecting unease about a new Pandora's Box opened.

Accordingly, a number of silver screen horrors explored the idea

that over-reaching scientists determined to "play God" (or at least tamper in His domain) would create monsters, or worse, shatter reality itself. In *Brain Dead* (1990), a scientist played by Bill Pullman explored a "kinder and gentler" form of lobotomy, one that seemed to destroy personal identity. And in *Event Horizon* (1997), a scientist played by Sam Neill opened the gateway to Hell itself.

In *Bride of Re-Animator* (1990), *Flatliners* (1990) and *Hideaway* (1995) the boundary of death was breached, with terrifying results. But there was also fear about the *beginning* of life in 1990s horrors, as evidenced by films that concerned reproductive issues. Among these were *The Unborn* (1991) and its sequel, which explored fertility and genetic engineering, *Alien Resurrection* (1997), which concerned the morality of cloning, and even *Man's Best Friend* (1993), which involved the creation of genetically-perfected "pets" to serve in American households.

Many films of the science run amok variety explored good intentions gone awry and the unintentional results of scientists literally playing Frankenstein. In *Jurassic Park*, John Hammond (Richard Attenborough) of InGen wanted to create an amusement park where he could safely share the wonders of real life dinosaurs with a fascinated world. But he learned that "life would find a way" and that his genetically-engineered recreations of prehistoric life could be neither controlled nor contained.

Many scientists were not exactly happy with this trend in 1990s horrors, which they viewed as dangerous "anti-science" propaganda. Indeed, *Jurassic Park* brought the argument to a head. In the *New York Times*, Malcolm W. Browne wrote about the idea of science run amok in the popular Steven Spielberg film:

In its attack on biotechnology, they say, *Jurassic Park* revives the Frankenstein image of amoral scientists unleashing forces they cannot control. The cinematic re-creation of animals that have been extinct for 65 million years will enchant viewers, they argue, making the movie's antiscience message all the more potent.¹⁴

Jurassic Park was hardly alone, however, in portraying scientists as irresponsible, if unwitting, agents of terror and exploiting scientific frontiers as a source of terror. In the third adaptation of H.G. Wells' famous novel, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, Moreau (Marlon Brando) believed he had discovered "the Devil" himself in genes; and sought to eradicate the Satanic monstrosity by creating strange new life-forms,

including chimerical humanimals and even an archetypal "Mini-me."

Ultimately, Moreau discovered the same lesson as the scientists in *Jurassic Park*. Independent beings resented being controlled, even by a benevolent God-like "Father" and would rebel, violently, against the condition of slavery.

Dr. Susan Tyler (Mira Sorvino) in *Mimic* (1997) likewise had noble intentions that went remarkably wrong. Through genetic splicing, Tyler created a new brand of bug called "The Judas" that could eradicate cockroaches infected with Strickler's, a plague killing children in New York. But after the plague's demise, the bugs unexpectedly lived, continued to thrive, and evolved to form a threat to mankind.

Once more, life found a way to continue, even though Tyler had created the insects with a "suicide" gene that was supposed to take effect after one generation. The safeguard dramatically failed.

Saffron Burrows' scientist, Dr. Susan McAlester, in *Deep Blue Sea* (1999) learned the same unpleasant lesson. It was her intention to cure Alzheimer's by experimenting on the brains of sharks. But by artificially enhancing those shark brains, she only created a new super predator, one with a taste for human flesh and a hankering to escape captivity. Unlike *Mimic's* scientist, McAlester paid for her foolishness with her life: a shark devoured her after tearing her to pieces.

The military was also behind several scientific abominations in the 1990s, including outof-control killing machines (*Hardware* [1990], *Eve of Destruction* [1991], *Screamers* [1996]) and monstrous beings who could, the Army believed, serve as super "soldiers" during wartime (*Syngenor* [1990], *Return of the Living Dead 3* [1993]). Big Business got into the act too, unleashing plagues (*Carnosaur* [1993]), dinosaurs (*The Lost World: Jurassic Park* [1997]) and other terrors upon the world in pursuit of a better bottom line.

As was fitting, the original "bad father," Victor Frankenstein himself, appeared in such films of the 1990s as Roger Corman's *Frankenstein Unbound* (1990) and the literary adaptation of Shelley's landmark text *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994). In both stories, Victor failed to stem his own ambition, and ended up creating an abomination, a monstrosity that had to be destroyed.

It wasn't only genetic engineering that created Frankenstein monsters in the 1990s. The decade's horror also reflected something else: a great fear of computers, technology and particularly a new invention called the Internet. The Internet, or "information superhighway" (or World Wide Web), allowed users to "log on" to a virtual world of research, entertainment games, and lightning-fast

communication. Suddenly, e-mail became the new preferred mode of communication and instant messaging allowed people across the globe to "talk" with one another in real time.

Another thing the Internet did, to the dismay of Hollywood producers, was draw out a new generation of movie critics and "fanboys" who saw fit to complain about every new film that was released in the late 1990s. The 1990s saw "the birth of an online virtual community that gives filmmakers instant feedback and fans the opportunity to voice opinions and engage in heated debate,"¹⁵ as Mark A. Altman described the new filmmaker/ audience paradigm.

It was no surprise that horror films exploited this new "realm" of terror. In one story in the anthology *Campfire Tales* (1997), an Internet stalker used information gleaned online to stalk a pre-adolescent girl at home alone. And in *The Last Broadcast* (1998), an Internet chat provided the (ignored) clue as to the secret identity of a diabolical murderer.

Early in the decade, "virtual reality," comprised of computer-simulated environments, offered dramatic danger. A megalomaniacal, super-intelligent Boogeyman conquered the realm of Cyberspace in Brett Leonard's *The Lawnmower Man* (1992). Later, a serial killer called Sid 6.7 escaped from Cyberspace in *Virtuosity* (1995). In both cases, technology meant to help man ended up virtually dooming him.

Even video games on the home computer were a source of anxiety in the 1990s, as evidenced by *Brainscan* (1994), which featured a CD-ROM "horror survival" game that could turn an average teenager into a cold-blooded murderer.

Live Any Good Books Lately? Literary Aspirations

Ever since *Carrie* in 1976, the literary works of prolific horror novelist Stephen King have proven fertile ground for film adaptations. The rate of King-related movie adaptations accelerated in the 1980s with efforts such as *The Shining* (1980), *The Dead Zone* (1981), *Cujo* (1983), *Christine* (1983), *Cat's Eye* (1985), *Maximum Overdrive* (1985) and more.

By the 1990s, every new Stephen King tome was being greedily gobbled up and re-purposed for Hollywood's consumption. King's work was easy to relate to and legitimately terrifying. Tony Magistrale wrote that King's literary (and eventually cinematic) monsters

... inhabit the ground floors of America's factories, high schools

and rectories. Some of his creature prowl the dark recesses of woods and swamp, but his most frightening creations can be found in neighborhood communities occupying positions of power and authority, or in Washington controlling the fate of the nation.¹⁶

As had been the case in the previous decade, first rate directors were recruited to bring the King material to the medium of film. Acclaimed director Rob Reiner directed *Misery* (1990), the story of a writer, Paul Sheldon (James Caan), confronted and imprisoned by his number one fan, Annie (Kathy Bates)—essentially an interloper—and forced to write a book that met her critical requirements, following the death of a franchise's beloved character, named, appropriately, "Misery."

George Romero directed *The Dark Half*, another King tale involving authors and their trade. Here, a man named Thad Beaumont (Timothy Hutton) was to confront his own alter-ego, in the form of his *nom-de-plume*: George Stark. The film underwent a troubled production history and was held back from release for over a year because of the difficulties of distributor, Orion Pictures. The movie premiered to disappointing notices in 1991.

Needful Things (1992), based on King's novel about conspicuous consumption, premiered in 1992 and also quickly disappeared from theaters. Despite its failure to make much of a dent at the box office, the production of King material continued unabated. *Thinner*, a book written under King's pseudonym, Richard Bachman, was directed by Tom Holland (*Fright Night* [1985]) in 1996 and concerned a frightening gypsy curse that caused a lawyer to literally waste away. King's original screenplay, *Sleepwalkers*, was also brought to the screen in 1992 by director Mick Garris, and showcased the new "morphing" effects of CGI.

Many Stephen King short stories were also adapted for the screen, including *Graveyard Shift* (1990), in which rats overran a New England textile mill, and *The Mangler* (1995), the tale of a sentient, evil laundry machine. Tobe Hooper, who had seen success with his TV miniseries adaptation of King's *Salem's Lot* in 1978, directed the latter, which was based on a story in the collection *Night Shift*. The screenplay went through something like 40 drafts, and shot in 1993 in South Africa, a money-saving gambit. *The Mangler* was advertised heavily as being the product of three horror greats (Hooper, King and lead actor Robert Englund), but the film grossed less than two-million dollars, even while playing in one thousand theaters nationwide. John Thonen wrote in *Cinefantastique* that the film experienced "one of the briefest and least successful major releases ... in recent history" and

observed that "The King franchise is justifiably dead."¹⁷

Another King-related film was a source of immense controversy in the early 1990s. *The Lawnmower Man* (1992) adopted the title of one of the master's lesser-known short stories, but otherwise bore no relation whatsoever to the source material. King correctly concluded that his name was being "strip-mined"¹⁸ and sued to have it removed from the film. He was successful in that effort, but feared that his reputation would suffer. By the end of the 1990s, it looked as though Stephen King would still be a major factor at the movies, but his nonhorror titles had replaced the horror ones to a large degree. Films such as the acclaimed *Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *The Green Mile* (2000) eclipsed his work in the genre.

Stephen King wasn't the only popular author whose work transitioned to the big screen in the 1990s. Michael Crichton, an author whose works often featured cutting-edge, hightech speculations mixed with adventure and horror, also experienced varying levels of success at the box office. His non-horror works, *Rising Sun* (1993), about a murder inside a Japanese company, and *Disclosure* (1994), about the hot-button issue of sexual harassment, were both big hits.

In the horror genre, his story of dinosaurs re-built under the auspices of genetic engineering, *Jurassic Park* (1993), became a blockbuster when released in the summer of 1993. The adventure film *Congo* (1995) was not as successful, and the decade closed with Crichton's *Sphere* (1998) adapted to the screen, again with less than great financial and critical acclaim.

In a decade during which actors, producers and directors steadfastly insisted that they were not vetting horror movies, many productions sought cover in the adaptation of horror literature, classics of the form. Francis Ford Coppola created *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), Kenneth Branagh directed *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994) and Neil Jordan adapted Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1994). In all cases, these films were lavish studio projects with big budgets. And in all cases, the films eschewed genre roots to some degree, interpreted instead as literary adaptations of great works of art.

Though it was fascinating to have A-list directors and big movie stars front adaptations of the works of Mary Shelley and Stoker, it was also plain that these talents didn't exactly understand the genre they were toiling in, either. For all their films' fine production values, they rarely proved legitimately frightening, or even particularly exciting. In searching for critical respectability, literary horror films in the 1990s often lost the sweet spot: moments of transgressive, decorum-

shattering fear.

H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe also had works adapted in the 1990s, again with disappointing results. In the case of Lovecraft, it was particularly difficult for filmmakers to present his "indescribable" brand of horror, and in the case of Edgar Allan Poe, producers often felt that his work needed updating, or refashioning to appeal to modern audiences.

What proved important was not a fidelity to source material, but the author's "brand name" above a title, which served as instant point of identification and a fulcrum for marketing campaigns.

All these literary adaptations of the 1990s reflected how unsure the genre had become of itself in the decade of Clinton. It was trying hard to recover from the slashers and slasher sequels that had dominated the previous decade, but groping to find a new and "respectable" format. Literary adaptations provided filmmakers and films that cover, but rarely lived up to the source material in any substantial fashion.

Uniquely, films about literature—about books and the written word—proved much more interesting than most adaptations of famous works. *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* in 1994 showcased a screenplay as the outline of existence itself, and proved an exercise in selfreflexive post-modernism. In 1995, John Carpenter's *In the Mouth of Madness* examined the popularity of Stephen King and horror novels in American culture, featuring the ghoulish work of an author called Sutter Cane (Jurgen Prochnow).

Wanna Hear a Story, City Boy? The Anthology Revival

One tried-and-true historical format that attempted a comeback in the 1990s was the horror anthology. In decades past, this omnibus format of short stories had given audiences such treats as *Tales from the Crypt* (1972), *Vault of Horror* (1973), *Creepshow* (1982) and *Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983). In the 1990s, horror anthologies proved surprisingly creative and original, even if none of the specific films made much of an impact at the box office.

Grim Prairie Tales (1990) was one of the decade's oddest examples of the format. Starring James Earl Jones and Brad Dourif, it was not merely an anthology but a genre blender combining Westerns and horror. The film depicted several tales of terror set in the 19th century on the American frontier. One particularly creepy story in the bunch involved a wandering female "monster" who could literally

absorb lovers into her womb.

Tales from the Hood (1995) also found purchase in the familiar anthology format, dramatizing a group of stories that involved the embodied African American experience. *Necronomicon: Book of the Dead* (1996) took a different stance and featured three stories from the writings of H.P. Lovecraft. *Two Evil Eyes* (1991), from George Romero and Dario Argento, adapted two stories from Edgar Allan Poe.

I See Why You Like This Video Camera So Much: The Blair Witch Project

In the summer of 1999, a movie from young directors Eduardo Sanchez and Daniel Myrick called *The Blair Witch Project* became a huge and unexpected box office hit, saw enormous critical success, and quickly proved the source of much debate in horror film studies.

The highly-influential film featured three young adults lost in the Maryland woods, possibly encountering a malevolent witch, or ... maybe something else. The film's budget was small, approximately \$35,000, and the entire movie was shot by the actors themselves using a video camera and a heavier, conventional film camera.

On release, *The Blair Witch Project* grossed \$140 million in the U.S. and another \$107 million in foreign territories, making it the biggest grossing independent film of all time. The film spawned a sequel called *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* in 2000, plus a series of books from Pocket, and even a line of video -games.

But some people insisted the film's success owed more to its revolutionary marketing strategy than to the specifics of the movie's narrative. *Advertising Age* described the film's promotion through the Internet (and specifically a *Blair Witch* website) as "an investigative campaign that allowed consumers to seek out information about Blair Witch to discover if they thought it was fact or fiction." ¹⁹

In other words, in the time honored tradition of such horrors as *The Legend of Boggy Creek* (1972), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), the makers of the *Blair Witch Project* sought to blur the line between truth and fiction, between fact and fantasy. Their story was not just "based on a true story," it purported to be the "found footage" of three lost students; footage that suggested but did not prove the existence of something supernatural.

The mystery of *The Blair Witch Project* (is it live or is it Memorex) proved impossible to resist, and leading up to the film's release, interest about the film swelled to incredible, heretofore unseen

proportions:

Over the next six months the Website grew to include documents and video clips, all of which maintained the film's poker-face illusion that the events it depicts are real. Meanwhile, Artisan employed a number of low-budget publicity tactics.... Rather than buy costly network ad time, the company screened the movie on college campuses and co-produced a special on the Blair Witch with the Sci-Fi channel. These low-key approaches helped foster the belief among audience members that they'd discovered the film for themselves—a belief that, in turn, fed traffic to the site. The weekend the movie opened, Artisan took out a full-page advertisement in *Variety*. Such ads traditionally tout a movie's opening gross; this one was slightly different. "Blairwitch.com," it read, "21,222,589 hits to date."²⁰

Even the manner of the film's production had been unconventional and trail-blazing, a guerrilla-style approach to filmmaking that ultimately reflected the "is it real or not" tenor of both the movie's ad campaign and the actual storyline.

For six days and nights, the actors camped in the woods, getting dirtier and hungrier as they filmed each other on 16mm-film camera and Hi-8 camcorder.... In lieu of a script, each morning they received private messages in film canisters, and were told not to share them with the others. " *Everything was on a need-to-know basis*," says Leonard, who before the film was photographing rock bands for smallish magazines. "My notes were like, 'You don't trust Heather, take control.'" At night, the directors would make noises and rustle the actors' tent to scare them. Production designer Ben Rock devised a creepy stick figure, obliquely menacing, and hung it in trees. Everything else they left to the cast's—and ultimately, the audience's—imagination. Though the actors would pass an occasional jogger, and sometimes cross a road, they began to feel cut off from the safety of the civilized world.²¹

The Blair Witch Project's unique approach to filmmaking and marketing ultimately came to annoy and repulse as many viewers as it attracted. But you can't discuss the 1990s without discussing its most famous and perhaps most original film. In a very real sense, and regardless of opinion about its quality, *The Blair Witch Project* re-

ignited the horror genre leading into the 2000s.

Other Trends: Digital Monsters and Remake Marketing

With films becoming increasingly expensive in the 1990s, horror films of the era often relied on two factors to get seats into theaters on opening weekend.

The first was the promise of some spectacular new CGI effects (*Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, *Jurassic Park*, *Godzilla* [1998]) that would bring to life a Boogeyman in a new fashion. This trend resulted in a virtual flood of new monster movies in the era, including *The Relic* (1997), *Anaconda* (1997), *Bats* (1999), *Deep Rising* (1998), *Deep Blue Sea* (1999) and more.

The second trend involved the treatment of movies as instantly recognizable brandnames. Instead of risking large budgets on an untried, unknown, original property, Hollywood studios decided instead to fashion remakes of genre classics instead, ones that audiences would immediately recognize from the title, and thus have a built-in interest in going to see.

In the 1990s, remake titles included *Night of the Living Dead* (1990), *Village of the Damned* (1995), *Diabolique* (1996), *Psycho* (1998), *The House on Haunted Hill* (1999) and *The Haunting* (1999). Although deeply unpopular with critics and genre scholars, these remakes often fulfilled their purpose, garnering enough discussion (and controversy) in the media to get those bodies into multiplexes.

The trend of remaking horror classics continued well into the 2000s, and, if anything, the pace increased tenfold in the new Millennium.

Auteurs

The 1990s saw the return of several horror directors who had contributed classic examples of the form in the previous two decades, the 1970s and 1980s. Of all these auteurs, it was probably Wes Craven, the genre's great moralist and intellectual, who most thrived.

Craven's output in the 1990s included the raw urban nightmare and commentary on voodoo economics, *The People Under the Stairs* (1991), the Pirandello-esque film-within-a-film (and Freddy Krueger sequel) *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994), the disappointing horror comedy *A Vampire in Brooklyn* (1995) and his two smash hits and

touchstones of the 1990s: *Scream* (1996) and *Scream 2* (1997). That's five films in a ten year span, with only one outright "bomb" (in the horror movie-killer year of 1995).

John Carpenter, another returning great, didn't fare quite so well. His horror output consisted of three films: *In the Mouth of Madness* (1994), *The Village of the Damned* (1995), and *John Carpenter's Vampires*. Only the last of those titles was a box office hit, though *In the Mouth of Madness* proved popular with critics and horror fans, for the most part. *The Village of the Damned* is widely considered the director's most disappointing effort. What remains interesting about Carpenter, however, is the fact that his films seem to age well. These three films of 1990s vintage, which seemed disappointing on release, now look like fine examples of the director's neo-classic form. Certainly, all of the films boast his visual grace, his trademark tracking shots, elaborate pans and zinging electronic scores.

Tobe Hooper and George Romero, two 1970s horror legends, saw even less success in the 1990s. Both shepherded Stephen King adaptations to the screen (*The Mangler* and *The Dark Half*), respectively, and both encountered critical scorn and box office failure.

While other horror greats like David Cronenberg and Sam Raimi largely absented themselves from the genre in the 1990s, new stars arose to take their places. First and foremost among these was David Fincher, a young director who had gotten his start in the industry helming music videos.

Fincher's style was high-tech grunge, and his frequently mentioned aesthetic pronounced that movies "should scar." In his 1990s efforts *Alien3* (1992) and *Se7en* (1995), more than a little scarring indeed occurred. Both films involved likeable characters in seemingly hopeless situations, surrounded by decaying infrastructure and blight. And both films offered dark, downbeat endings. Critic David Ansen called Fincher a "master of atmosphere"²² and critic David Denby noted that he had "an unmistakable talent for mood."²³ At the *Los Angeles Times*, Jack Mathews enthused that Fincher had the "touch of Hitchcock when it comes to creating tension and suspense, in knowing just how far he can go in taunting the audience with distractions and red herrings."²⁴ After these two horror films, Fincher went on to non-horror box-office hits including *The Game* (1997), *Fight Club* (1999), *Panic Room* (2002), *Zodiac* (2008) and *The Social Network* (2010).

Another talent, Richard Stanley, showed similar promise and conviction, but ultimately fizzled out. Stanley directed the cyberpunk

Hardware (1990) and the dream-like, *Millennial Dust Devil* (1992), two unique horrors that revealed his penchant, much like Fincher, for downbeat, fin-de-siècle imagery and images of amorphous, all-encompassing evil.

Stanley is known to create his films from "the fabric of mysticism, magic and myth"²⁵ according to the book *Contemporary British and Irish Film Directors*. Born near Capetown in Africa, Stanley also worked in the field of music videos in the 1980s. His father was in the South African Communist Party and his mother wrote about legends of South Africa, collecting and writing down stories of oral tradition. After deserting the Army and traveling to Europe, Stanley ended up making horror movies in the States, ones that eschewed happy endings or even, sometimes, real narrative closure. Unfortunately, Stanley was replaced on the set of *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, and his career as a horror movie director came to an untimely end. He has since moved into the world of documentary filmmaking to great acclaim.

Director Robert Rodriguez emerged from the American independent film movement of the 1990s, particularly the school of low budget, guerrilla-style filmmaking. A frequent collaborator with Quentin Tarantino, Rodriguez quickly became famous in the 1990s for his ability to move effortlessly from role-to-role in the collaborative movie-making process. He





Face-lift of the Damned. Images from the original 1960 *Village of the Damned* (top) and the 1995 remake from John Carpenter (bottom). frequently served not only as director, but as production designer, editor, director of photography and even sound editor on his films.

In the 1990s, Rodriguez made the incendiary crime/vampire flick *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) starring George Clooney, and the Kevin Williamson alien invasion in high school horror, *The Faculty* (1998).

Meanwhile, Mexican director Guillermo Del Toro was another up and comer in the 1990s, though he came primarily from the special-effects end of filmmaking (and had even studied with guru Dick Smith as a child). Del Toro's films were less overtly violent and fast-paced than Rodriguez's and often featured elements from the "magical realism" school. In the 1990s, Del Toro contributed such films to the genre as *Cronos* (1993) and the big-budgeted bug movie, *Mimic* (1997). By the 2000s, with films such as *The Devil's Backbone* (2001), *Blade 2* (2002), *Hellboy* (2004) and *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) behind him, he was considered one of the genre's great voices.

Another director who worked frequently in the 1990s was Steve Miner. Miner directed two *Friday the 13th* films in the 1980s, as well as *House* (1986). In the decade of Clinton, he started off a franchise in fine form with *Warlock* (1991), resurrected one with his efficient work on the lean *Halloween: H20* (1998), and helmed a horror comedy written by David E. Kelley, called *Lake Placid* (1999). Unlike many horror icons, Miner's trademark is not style, but economy and efficiency, a workman-like approach that has worked well for him

across a variety of projects on both television (where he has directed episodes of *Smallville*, *Psych*, *Dawson's Creek* and *The Practice*) and in film.

III

The Films (by Year of Release)

More than 300 films are surveyed in the following section of *Horror Films of the 1990s*. Unlike the Internet Movie Database, however, the films are dated by the time of their release (either theatrically or on home video), not to the production/copyright year. Direct-to-Video films are also featured here, and noted with the abbreviation (DTV) next to their titles.

1990

January 13:

In Virginia, Douglas Wilder is inaugurated as first elected African American governor in the United States.

January 18:

Three-term African American Washington, D.C., Mayor Marion Barry is arrested for drug possession after a videotaped sting operation and sentenced to prison. He is re-elected to mayor following his jail term, in 1995.

February 11:

After twenty-seven years of incarceration, South African freedom fighter Nelson Mandela is released from jail at last.

March 15:

Mikhail Gorbachev is elected president of the Soviet Union.

March 28:

President Bush awards the late Jesse Owens the Congressional Gold Medal.

April 20:

The Hubble Space Telescope is launched.

June 26:

President Bush breaks his 1988 convention pledge not to hike taxes ("read my lips, no new taxes,") causing great discontent amongst conservatives and laying the groundwork for his eventual re-election defeat in 1992.

July 25:

Comedienne Roseanne Barr sings a terrible, off-key rendition of "The National Anthem" at a San Diego baseball game, earning boos and hisses from the assembled crowd. President Bush calls the performance disgusting and a "disgrace."

July 26:

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 is signed into law by President Bush, assuring that those Americans encumbered by "physical or mental impairment" are not the victims of discrimination in work or public places.

August 2:

Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait, an aggressive act which precipitates the first Gulf War in 1991.

September 11:

President Bush warns Saddam Hussein in a televised address that he will use force to liberate Kuwait if Hussein does not retreat from its borders.

October 3:

West and East Germany are re-unified following the end of the Cold War.

November 29:

The United Nations Security Council, via Resolution 678, authorizes military action against Iraq in the event of its failure to leave Kuwait by January 15, 1991.

December 9:

Slobodan Milosevic becomes president of Serbia.

December 16:

Jean-Bertrand Aristide is elected president of Haiti.

Other:

Home Alone (1990) is the top-grossing film of the year, followed by Ghost (1990).

The Ambulance * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Eric Roberts (Joshua Baker); James Earl Jones (Lt.

Spencer); Megan Gallagher (Officer Sandy Malloy); Richard Bright (McCloskey); Janine Turner (Cheryl); Eric Braeden (The Doctor); Red Buttons (Elias Zacharia); Stan Lee (Himself); Nick Chinlund (Hugo); Michael O'Hare (Hale).

CREW: Epic Productions and Sarlui/Diamonte Present an Esparza/Katz Production, a film by Larry Cohen. *Film Editor:* Armond Lebowitz. *Music:* Jay Chattaway. *Production Designer:* Lester Cohen. *Director of Photography:* Jacques Haitkin. *Written and directed by:* Larry Cohen. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An artist at Marvel comics named Joshua (Roberts) hits on a beautiful young woman, Cheryl (Turner), mere moments before she collapses on a busy Manhattan street. Cheryl is driven away from the scene by a mysterious ambulance and then disappears to a strange hospital where a creepy doctor (Braeden) tends to her health. Meanwhile, Joshua goes in search of Cheryl when she doesn't show up at the right hospital. When the disbelieving cops won't help with his search, Josh ends up allied with a kooky old man, Elias (Buttons), and in a final battle, plays chicken with the sinister ambulance.

COMMENTARY: The usually reliable Larry Cohen, maestro of *It's Alive* (1972) and *The Stuff* (1985), strikes out with *The Ambulance*, a scattershot effort that serves as a good example of what went so dramatically awry with many horror movies in the 1990s.

In fact, *The Ambulance* is almost a textbook case. It boasts an extremely intriguing premise, but then veers, seemingly at random, from quirky comedy to horror and back without settling on a consistent tone or approach. A twitchy central performance by the mullet-wearing Eric Robert doesn't exactly help ground the material in reality, either.

Cohen is universally a rich source of great horror premises, and *The Ambulance* is no exception to that rule. The idea informing *The Ambulance* is timely: a secret organization (a conspiracy) exploits the anonymous lifestyle of the modern American city-dweller (where nobody really knows anybody very well) and abducts people away from accident scenes in order to harness bodies for black market organ sales.

If you've ever watched an ambulance drive away from the scene

of an accident, sirens blazing, and wondered what was next for the person inside, this movie proposes an answer most sinister and tantalizing. That answer also touches on several key issues of the decade: from the conspiracy in plain sight (the bread and butter of *The XFiles*) to the idea that the contemporary city is a bastion of danger, decay and corruption (think: *Se7en*).

The character set-up is even more compelling. On the day that a cocky Don Juan miraculously makes some headway with a gorgeous passerby on a Big Apple street, she vanishes. What became of her? Who took her? Where was she taken? And most importantly, *why* was she taken? These ingredients promise a terrific and unsettling mystery. The answer, regarding black market organs, both harks back to *Coma* (1978) and suggests a popular 1990s urban legend about trafficking in kidneys.

Alas Cohen shoots himself in the foot by revealing almost immediately that the lovely Cheryl (*Northern Exposure's* [1990–1995] Janine Turner) is alive and well, if endangered, in a luridly-colored but very cheap-looking hospital room. Almost immediately, she is greeted there by a campy, mustache-twirling evil doctor, who further contributes to the camp tenor. The great Eric Braeden (*Colossus: The Forbin Project* [1970]) assays the role of this villain, one who "likes to touch human skin through a surgical glove."

That's a creepy, bizarre admission to be certain, but by revealing Cheryl's destination in the first act, *The Ambulance* becomes simply a connect-the-dots thriller, not an authentic mystery. It devolves into a relatively straightforward matter of Josh tracking Cheryl down, not Josh wandering into a vast conspiracy and wondering if his wouldbe lover is even still alive. The component of spine-tingling uncertainty is almost immediately taken off the table.

The dialogue in *The Ambulance* is sassy and smart, but everyone plays the material for hokey laughs. James Earl Jones portrays a cop named Spencer who, when battling the ambulance, keeps getting wounded but doesn't die. The scene leaves reality behind and morphs into something closer to slapstick, but not the good, Sam Raimi meaning of that term. Spencer's character "tic" is that he's always snapping his ubiquitous chewing gum—even with a scalpel intruding into his chest and blood running out of his mouth. It's just not very funny.

The film's editing approach leaves something to be desired too. For instance, the evil ambulance just seems to appear at the *New York Post* parking lot ... but no reason is given for its presence there, an indication, perhaps, that a scene was deleted. Later, after the evil

hospital is busted by Joshua and the police, the film cuts to our heroes in a limo. Why? Where did they get it? Who paid for it? Is this limo ride happening on the same night as the bust? It seems that the movie just skipped a track.

Red Buttons is genuinely funny in *The Ambulance*, and *Millennium's* (1996–1999) Megan Gallagher is charming in the role of a helpful cop, but even their dedicated efforts can't rescue a film that seems determined to undercut itself. The tone is all over the place, and it's difficult to believe that this was made by the same director who crafted *Q: The Winged Serpent* (1981), another movie that observed, far more skillfully, the strangeness of modern city life.

***Arachnophobia* * * ***

Critical Reception

"We're not talking giant spiders with horrid fangs and weird screeches from the Fifties here, we're talking your basic, small, furry, scurrying bugger that scares the bejesus out of most us. That's *Arachnophobia's* stroke of genius. In other ways, the film goes overboard; Julian Sands is a too-somber arachnid expert, while John Goodman (*Roseanne*) overplays a parody of an exterminator."—Randy Pittman, *Library Journal*, March 15, 1991, page 127

"For a movie that plans to scare the kapok out of us, *Arachnophobia* (rated PG-13) is a friendly and nicely witty affair; technically it's a wonder. All its designs and its effects are perfect."—Sheila Benson, *The Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 1990, Calendar page 1

" *Arachnophobia* is an immensely amiable horror movie. It's perfect for drive-ins—the few that are left."—David Denby, *New York*, July 30, 1990, page 51

CAST: Jeff Daniels (Dr. Ross Jennings); Julian Sands (Dr. Atherton); Harley Jane Kozak (Molly Jennings); Brian McNamara (Chris Collins); Stuart Pankin (Sheriff Lloyd Parsons); Roy Brocksmith (Irv Kendall); Mark L. Taylor (Jerry Manley); Peter Jason (Henry Beechwood); John Goodman (Delbert McClintock); Kathy Kinney (Blaire Kendall); Mary Carver (Margaret Hollins); Henry Jones (Sam Metcalf).

CREW: Hollywood Pictures and Amblin Entertainment present a Frank Marshall Film. *Castings:* Mike Fenton, Judy Taylor. *Music:* Trevor Jones. *Film Editor:* Michael Kahn. *Production Design:* James Bissell. *Director of Photography:* Mikael Saloman. *Executive Producers:* Steven Spielberg, Frank Marshall. *Story by:* Don Jakoby. *Written by:* Don Jakoby, Wesley Strick. *Produced by:* Richard Vane, Kathleen Kennedy. *Directed by:* Frank Marshall. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 110 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A sports photographer, Manley (Taylor), joins entomologist Dr. Atherton (Sands) on an expedition into the remote Amazon jungle—a trip to discover new and rare breeds of insects and other wild-life. After the photo shoot, however, Manley is bitten by a prehistoric spider and dies immediately from the poison venom. His corpse is transported to the States, to the idyllic California town of Canaima, where family man and new town doctor Ross Jennings (Daniels) is attempting to establish a foothold now that Dr. Metcalf (Jones) has gone back on his word and refused to retire. Before long, the deadly spider from South America has mated and its offspring spread out across Canaima in search of food, causing a rash of deaths. Dr. Atherton joins Ross and "rock-and-roll" exterminator Delbert (Goodman) to stop the spiders before they overtake the entire human population.

COMMENTARY: Patronizingly billed as a "thrillomedy" (thriller + comedy) and not as a straightup horror film, *Arachnophobia* is first and foremost a crowd-pleaser and roller-coaster ride. As a spiders-on-the-march, revenge-of-nature horror film, it definitively lacks the atmosphere of dread, low-budget gusto, and audacious imagination of

the similarly-themed 1970s flick, *Kingdom of the Spiders* (1977) starring William Shatner.

With far fewer resources at its disposal, *Kingdom of the Spiders* threw everything but the kitchen sink at the Shat in an effort to scare and discomfort audiences. By comparison, *Arachnophobia* just doesn't evidence that level of commitment to the genre. It's a thrill all right, but not one you remember much after the experience of watching the movie is over.

On the other hand, *Arachnophobia* is beautifully photographed. The prologue set in the Amazon is gorgeous, and it sets exactly the right tenor for the narrative; introducing audiences to a virgin land: a place of wonders and terrors that human eyes have never before seen. After such a grand opening, however, it's almost depressing to settle down in small town America and watch several fine character actors (Jones, Jason, Brocksmyth) perform, basically, shtick, while waiting to be offed by the poisonous spider population.

John Goodman's character Delbert McClintock is especially annoying (and calculating), a walking comic-strip replete with funny costume and funny voice. "Yeah, I'm bad," he quips after executing some arachnids.

Why yes, he is bad.

Delbert is an unnecessary distraction in the film, and his character panders to the movie's lowest common denominator approach to entertaining. For goodness sake, Goodman's buffoon even boasts a distinctive comedic theme song to accompany his entrance into the film, which is gilding the lily. The upshot: you feel, at times there's no reality *Arachnophobia* won't sacrifice for the sake of a cheap laugh or a cheap thrill.

Yet while the human characters are snarky, wimpy, and profoundly insubstantial, the camera-man, Mikael Solamon, and director, Frank Marshall, have a blast with the spiders. They take great glee in staging over-the-top "where's the spider?"—moments with pesky arachnids showing up inside football helmets, fuzzy slippers, popcorn bowls and yes, even during the shower of a nubile young cheerleader. Just as the spider in the shower scene is about to strike, a river of soapy water washes it from its perch in a sweet spot. This moment, and all the spidery scenes, feature a kind of breathless, anticipatory quality and are unreservedly fun.

Besides, only an old curmudgeon could truly dislike a movie that adopts a "spider cam," visually mimicking spider-attacks by using the camera to repeatedly lunge at Daniels (from spider eye level) while he's armed with a shovel and doing battle with these eight-legged

nemeses.



Tilting at windmills? Actor Jeff Daniels bats at phantom spiders in the “thrill-omedy” *Arachnophobia* (1990).

The special effects in *Arachnophobia* are extraordinary. The spider army teems across the walls of Ross's house; the General (the lead spider) dodges wine bottle grenades during the final battle royale, and even navigates a tightrope of overhead plumbing pipes. All of this material is incredibly rendered and in broad terms the movie evidences a real visual flair and sense of kineticism. The scene in which our heroes search Metcalf 's house for one of the offending poison spiders is tense, dramatic and well-orchestrated, enhancing suspense by cutting between four character perspectives in short order.

Also present in *Arachnophobia* is a strong argument about what happens when animals are carried out of (or escape from) their natural habitats. 1995's *Outbreak* involved the same topic, only with a monkey carrying hemorrhagic fever. This was a relevant and important discussion in the 1990s because membership rolls in animal protection groups like PETA were growing exponentially and Americans were becoming aware, for the first time of so-called "animal rights."

With the ease of cheap commercial air travel in the 1990s, animals and, indeed, *diseases* could be transplanted to locations far from the point of origin and the result, as seen in *Arachnophobia*, could be chaos. The 1990s was the era of connectedness, through the Internet, through globalization, and with free trade treaties. In some way, *Arachnophobia* looks at the perils inherent when all corners of the world are within but a mere few hours' flight time.

This theme is interesting and never heavy handed but because of the film's jokey, tongue-in-cheek approach, one never comes to strongly identify with the troika of spider killers (Russ, Delbert and Atherton) or their noble mission as powerfully as one did with Brody, Quint and Hooper in Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) ... and that's clearly the model and hope here. *Jaws* had humor aplenty, but it was all naturalistic humor, and intrinsic to the characters. *Arachnophobia* walks through the door looking for humor at the sacrifice of its humanity and authenticity. The spider love scene played out between the South American "General" and American spider in a barn is just plain silly.

After awhile, one begins to suspect that, with all its narrative-mocking humor, *Arachnophobia* is defensive about something. Like, if someone were to say he didn't find it particularly scary, the producers would jump in and say "it's supposed to be funny!" in response. It's a cinematic hedging of bets that implies some deep-seated uncertainty about the filmmaker's ability to legitimately scare, or perhaps even a disrespect for the genre. Again, this was a common thing in the 1990s too, especially in the early part of the decade. The genre was sometimes played for laughs.

Arachnophobia is a good, enjoyable movie, but every time it works up a full head of steam, it backs away and builds an ironic distance between itself and the audience. That's no way to make a horror movie; and killer spiders are villains too good for just any old "thrill-omedy."

Baby Blood (a.k.a. The Evil Within) * * * .

Cast and Crew

CAST: Emmanuelle Escourrou (Yanka); Jean-Francois Gallotte (Richard); Christian Sinninger (Lohman); Francois Frappier (Leopard Delivery Man); Thierry Le Portier (Le dompteur); Roselyn Geslot

(Rosette); Remy Roubakha (Passenger in Taxi); Eric Averlant (Chauffeur); Jacques Audiard (Jogger); Jean-Claude Romer (Howling Man); Roger Placenta (Voice of Monster).

CREW: Heuf de couer presents a Partners Production/Exo 7 Production. *Scenario and dialogue:* Alain Robak, Serge Cukier. *Director of Photography:* Bernard Dechet. *Special Effects:* Benoit Lestang. *Mechanical Effects:* Jean-Marc Toussaint. *Montage:* Elizabeth Moulinier. *Music:* Carlos Acciari. *Production Director:* Daniel Deschamps. *Produced by:* Joelle Malberg, Irene Sohm, Ariel Zeitoun. *Directed by:* Alain Robak. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A snake-like creature from Africa crawls inside the uterus of an abused woman, Yanka (Escourrou), living in a circus and slowly begins to grow in her (already pregnant) womb. The parasite demands that Yanka kill men in order to provide it blood to nourish it. At first Yanka is reluctant to comply, but soon the creature inside becomes her only companion, and a maternal instinct develops. The beast tells her that it is her child, and that it must return to the ocean, where it will evolve and—in five billion years time—come to supplant man as the dominant life-form of planet Earth. A beleaguered Yanka continues to commit bloody murder to nurse her "baby," and takes drastic steps to be certain her ward makes it to the water's edge.

COMMENTARY: There's an old urban legend about a snake that crawled up inside a woman's womb by night and made itself an unlikely home there. As the story goes, the next morning, the unlucky, swollen woman believed she was pregnant.

This ultra-gory and strange French splatter movie *Baby Blood* takes a similar tack as its narrative beginning. A small, wormy parasite bloodily exits a circus leopard from Africa and then makes its way inside the uterus of a much-put upon, much-abused woman, Yanka. She is already pregnant, and there's plenty of womb to grow...

So, for all intents and purposes, this human woman becomes the creature's mother. "Feed me," it demands and indeed she starts to nourish it and finally even love it. Naturally, nourishing it means feeding it human blood.

This is such a perverse and bloody film, and yet *Baby Blood* evidences an odd power too. At first, Yanka is repulsed by the thing

inside her and its horrible, bloody demands. "Give me one good reason to take care of you. Just one!" Yanka demands.

But soon, something else kicks in; something that shifts her way of thinking. Yanka likes having the monster inside to talk to, to keep her company. Maybe it's the biological, maternal instinct at work. Or perhaps it's just that Yanka is lonely, and no man has ever spoken to her on such intimate and needy terms. Or perhaps the real issue is that she is drawn to abusive men (like her brutal husband) and this parasite is just the latest in a long line of them.

On one hand, the monster is Yanka's internal abuser, telling her it can cause her "agony" if she disobeys it. On the other hand, however, it tells her that it "thinks like a human" and that it is her "child." It also informs her it wants to be born a human. She comes to love it.

Given this dynamic, *Baby Blood* obsesses on the nature of motherhood. Against her better judgment, Yanka becomes the servant and custodian of the creature inside her, even though it is not technically hers. The movie is either a comment on a mother's endless capacity to love unconditionally her child, or the story of a woman who is so beaten down by men that she will even submit to an abuser *inside* her own body.

Or perhaps the story is simply about human nature—about the enduring quest for permanence, in line with Dame Rebecca West's (1892– 1983) quotation: "Motherhood is neither a duty nor a privilege, but simply the way that humanity can satisfy the desire for physical immortality and triumph over the fear of death." In a world of such pain, Yanka's "act" of nourishing the creature will have long-lasting repercussions. It is something permanent in a world of impermanence.

The movie takes up the duration of Yanka's pregnancy, and many times during this incubation, Yanka must kill men to feed the baby. Gorgeous and voluptuous, Yanka transforms into a deadly femme fatale. Like Julia in *Hellraiser* (1987), she lures unsuspecting men to their deaths with the promise of sex. The violent scenes in *Baby Blood* are literally blood baths, on a par with the excessive gore seen in Peter Jackson's *Dead Alive* (1990), for instance. However, here the violence is not played for cartoonish laughs, though some murders are so over-the-top (and so ... moist) that that they invite nervous, uncomfortable laughter.

In the end, the monster is born and it abandons Yanka, fleeing to the sea where it will evolve and "take man's place in about 5 billion years." Once more, Yanka is left alone, abandoned. This may be a

metaphor for motherhood too. Once born, children develop quickly, grow up and live their own lives (as it should be), and some parents feel abandoned, left-behind or unimportant. The generations pass.

In raising and then bloodily navigating such issues surrounding maternity, *Baby Blood* is surely one of the most original, most disgusting horror movies of the 1990s, and it can be interpreted in a number of ways. Either the monster is a "user" who took everything he could from "Mom" and then split, or he really is a child, a new life-form who will one day evolve to control the Earth itself. If the latter is the case, then Yanka is certainly the spiritual mother of this new race, for good or ill.

In whatever way *Baby Blood* is interpreted, it will affect the viewer deeply. It's disgusting, over-the-top at points, ridiculous, and showcases a deep sense of unease about issues like reproduction and the sensitive nature of our bodies, women's bodies.

Watch it on Mother's Day.

Basket Case 2 * * .

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kevin Van Hentenryck (Dwayne); Annie Ross (Granny Ruth); Kathy Mersk (Marcie); Heather Rattray (Susan); Jason Evers (The Editor); Ted Sorel (Phil); Judy Grafe (Newswoman); Jan Saint (Lyle Barker).

CREW: Shapiro/Glickenhau Entertainment Present an Ievins/Henenlotter Production. *Film Editor:* Kevin Tent. *Music:* Joe Renzetti. *Special Make-up Effects:* Gabe Bartolos. *Director of Photography:* Robert M. Baldwin. *Executive Producer:* James Glickenhau. *Produced by:* Edgar Ievins. *Written and directed by:* Frank Henenlotter. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Dwayne (Van Hentenryck) and his monstrous sibling, Belial, survive a fall from a hotel window in Times Square, only to become the topic *du jour* of all the TV news channels. They escape the hospital with the help of two women, Granny Ruth (Ross) and the lovely Susan (Rattray), who run a secret home for freaks. Meanwhile,

a nosy reporter, Marcy Elliott (Mersk), at the tabloid paper called *Judge and Jury* pursues the story of the Bradley brothers and threatens everything Granny Ruth and her pro-freak movement has accomplished. Both Belial and Dwayne find love in Ruth's house, but for at least one brother, that love ends tragically.

COMMENTARY: This silly sequel to the 1982 classic *Basket Case* eschews all the qualities that made the down-and-dirty, low-budget original such a great pleasure. There, New York City was dangerously and unpredictably squalid, and the film seemed almost completely lensed in sleazy hotel rooms and on darkened streets. The cast of the original was edgy and authentic too, and the film oozed an unsavory, dangerous, neon-lit vibe. Thus *Basket Case* was a vivid portrait of a decaying modern city and two of its strangest inhabitants. The film won Henenlotter many admirers, and that reputation was cemented with his even more deranged, even sleazier, *Brain Damage* (1988).

By contrast, this disappointing 1990 sequel to *Basket Case* appears as though it was shot for television and features an array of cheap, phonylooking freaks to keep company with the murderous Belial (still a literalization of the pro-life argument: deliver the baby to term, no matter that it is a hideous, deformed monster). These new freaks are so fantastical, so bizarre, so utterly unreal, however, that the sequel quickly sacrifices almost all sense of verisimilitude. The monsters look more like ambulatory piñatas than living creatures, and that means they are not effective as vehicles for horror.

This isn't to argue that *Basket Case 2* is an empty film. It isn't. To a large degree, "realism" isn't the name of Henenlotter's game here. Instead, he trades his creepy, dread-filled atmosphere for a giant helping of radical social satire. The director's target is the increasingly tabloid-centric American culture (here represented by *Judge and Jury*), and his sympathy is with a disdained minority's battle for racial justice in an unjust, after-Reagan, conservative climate.

On the former front, *Basket Case 2* wastes no time positioning the bloodsoaked Bradley brothers as media celebrities, and *Basket Case 2* features scenes of an unscrupulous reporter sneaking into their hospital room to get an "exclusive interview."



Belial is ready for his close-up as director Frank Henenlotter gets his freak on for *Basket Case 2* (1990).

Granny Ruth later dresses down that same reporter, Marcie, informing her that she finds everything about her identity "cheap and contemptible." It's no coincidence that Granny's take is Henenlotter's precise take too on an increasingly out-of-control media that thrives on sensationalism and "news lite" at the expense of real journalism. This is a timely critique, given the proliferation of cable tabloid programs such as *Inside Edition* and *A Current Affair* in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Henenlotter gets the details right too, such as *Judge and Jury's* blazingly arrogant and selfrighteous advert-line: "America's bravest paper." That sounds fair and balanced, doesn't it? Not to mention self-serving.

Henenlotter is clever as ever here because his two targets (tabloid culture and racism) connect in subtle fashion. As Elayne Rapping, a noted media critic, wrote about tabloid talk shows in the 1990s, "The people on these shows are an emotional vanguard, blowing the lid off the idea that America is anything like the place Ronald Reagan pretended to live in."¹

By explicitly featuring exaggerated freaks that might very well appear on *The Ricki Lake Show* or *Geraldo*, and referring to them in politically-correct terms as "Unique Individuals," Henenlotter makes

the case about race and the exploitation of race in America. He also makes a case about political correctness. Granny Ruth seems to want to forget that some of the freaks are murderers. Of course, she would likely state that they are products of their violent environment.

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In terms of context, Henenlotter's movie even takes the time and effort to show the freaks connecting a ramp to their van (already equipped with handicapped plates), a clear reference to 1990's Americans with Disabilities Act, a law signed by President Bush in July of 1990 ensuring fair treatment of the handicapped in the workplace. The message: no matter what you look like, no matter the color of the skin, we're of "the same flesh." There's not much intellectual distance, the movie suggests, between the physically handicapped and the physically hideous. But society at large—the society of tabloid media—only wants to feature these disdained individuals when there's money to be made, when they can serve as "freak of the week."

"We're all of the same flesh," Susan informs Dwayne (a reference to Granny Ruth's literary treatise, *Of the Same Flesh*), hoping to help him understand the case for Freaks Rights. And this is the movie's point indeed: we're all the same under the skin. We all love and hate,

hope and dream.

Since the horror movie is often such a strong vehicle for social commentary, Henenlotter's focus on satire is commendable, even admirable. But ultimately *Basket Case 2* sacrifices too much by way of actual horror. Belial and his kindred just aren't scary anymore. The film is determinedly a goof, and a silly goof at that—more fantasy land, tongue-in-cheek antics than a work of art authentically dread-filled.

It's great to discuss conformity, and Dwayne's desire to "fit in with everyone else" in a *Basket Case* movie, but *Basket Case 2* looks so cheapjack and is played so archly by bad performers in terrible make-up that the message gets lost amidst the dross. If all of the social commentary could have come in a more believable, and more frightening package, *Basket Case 2* might have lived up to the reputation of its admired predecessor.

LEGACY: *Basket Case 3* (1992) was shot back-to-back with *Basket Case 2*, and if anything, the second sequel treads even deeper into physical comedy and ridiculous antics with the freaks.

Blood Games **(a.k.a. *Baseball Bimbos in Hillbilly Hell*) * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Gregory Cummings (Roy Collins); Laura Albert (Babe); Shelly Abblette (Donna); Luke Shay (Mino Collins); Ross Hagen (Midnight); George Buck Flower (Ernest Wall); Don Dowe (Holt); Julie Hall (Stoney); Rhyve Sawyer (Wanda); Doc Willis (Ronnie); Pala Manga (Louise); Sabrina Hills (Connie); Randi Randolph (Ingrid); Sonjia Redo (Shorty).

CREW: Epic Productions Presents a Yakov Bentsvi/Fortune Entertainment Group Production, a Film by Tanya Rosenberg. *Casting:* Jacob Bressler, Reggie De Morton. *Costume Designer:* Frank Billecci. *Music:* Greg Turner. *Director of Photography:* Sam Gart. *Film Editor:* Rick Mitchell. *Production Design:* Philp Boandes. *Produced by:* Yakov Bensvi, Mark Dane. *Story by:* Jim Makichuk. *Written by:* Craig L. Clyde, James

L. Hennessy, George P. Sanders. With *Additional Material* by: Robert Pfeffer. *Directed by:* Tanya Rosenberg. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A friendly baseball game between an all-girls team and Mino Collins' (Shay) redneck "boys" team turns ugly when the ladies smash the gents 17 to 2 and the men grow nasty and unsportsmanlike about their ass whupping. After Mino loses a one thousand dollar bet on the game, he reneges on paying the girls, and the coach assaults him to get the money. Before long, Mino and his thugs turn murderous, and the women on the baseball team are chased into the woods, where a life and death battle of the sexes occurs.

COMMENTARY: The relatively obscure savage cinema entry *Blood Games* is that rarest of rare birds: it's exploitative, scary, *and* it has something valuable to say about the American culture of the 1990s. As such, the film seems a legitimate heir to *I Spit on Your Grave* (1979), especially since it concerns, shall we say, women's issues.

The primary women's issue in *Blood Games* is that all the men in the film are louts and rednecks with fragile egos and one-track minds. This full-throated, violent battle of the sexes begins with a friendly baseball game that isn't really so friendly. The girls' team (consisting, rather improbably, entirely of supermodel quality lookers) skunks the men, and, well, those fragile male egos just can't take it.

First, they resort to cheating and trip a female player on the field. Then the men resort to physical abuse. One player, Stoney, gets punched in the face to prevent her from scoring.

Despite such aggressive tactics, the game is lost and the men imagine all kinds of excuses why they've been defeated ("don't let those knockers hypnotize you, boy!" says one redneck), but the bottom line is easy for all to see: the women are simply better players.

Naturally, the rednecks (who sport Confederate flags as decorations) can't accept this simple fact. They blame their loss on the opposing team's inherent sexiness. "Your ladies performed their tits and ass routine well," croaks the movie's bad guy, Mino Collins.

It's always easier to blame someone else than look in the mirror, isn't it, Mino?

Before long, the humiliated men savagely murder the girls' coach (in very bloody fashion) and begin a redneck jihad against the team. The women, on their bus bound for home, must brace for the rampage, but this is easier said than done because Collins is a Vietnam veteran and treats this all-out campaign for male superiority as a war. He strategically sets up blockades and road blocks, herds the women into the forest as they try to escape to Flint Ridge, thirty miles distant, and, well, just will not give up. In fact, Collins keeps popping up, even after knocked down, in true horror movie, sting-in-the-tale/tail fashion.

At first, the women aren't really prepared for a confrontation of this magnitude. They split up into two groups: those who flee, and those who fight. One woman, Donna, stands up and says "I've been pushed around my whole life by lousy men and I'm sick of it." Soon after this statement of principle, director Rosenberg stages a slowmotion battle in the forest and victory depends, uniquely, on teamwork. The men are out for themselves, whereas the women come together and strike back *en masse*. Specifically, the catcher gives signals to the pitcher, and she clubs a villain with a fast ball (a stone).

Nice.

I won't lie and say that *Blood Games* doesn't pander to some pretty base male instincts. On the contrary, it panders in true exploitation movie fashion. For instance, there's a long locker room scene and even a shower scene here, with plenty of T & A shots front and center. But importantly, the women are not portrayed as insipid and defenseless, and they are not defined solely by their genitals. At the same time that the movie exploits the women's bodies, it makes the point that they are exploited creatures ... considered by the men only for their bodies and not their abilities.

That may not be sufficiently enlightened for some, but it worked for me: *Blood Games* speaks in the violent, didactic, and—yes—erotic vernacular of *I Spit on Grave* (1979) and the rape and revenge subgenre. In the 1990s, you just don't get many movies this hard-hitting and nasty.

And make no mistake: the battle of the sexes was a major social issue of the 1990s, rearing its ugly head again and again, so *Blood Games* is certainly seasonable. For instance, the mass media basically indicted the female victim in the William Kennedy Smith date rape case of March 1991 because she removed her panty hose for a walk on the beach with the alleged perpetrator. In other words, *she was asking for it*.

The same unpleasant scenario came up again in regards to Mike

Tyson in July of the same year. Desiree Washington, an eighteen-year-old woman and beauty pageant contestant, decided to visit Tyson in his hotel room, only to be raped. Again, it was the victim who was put on trial in the media, with Washington's history of "sexually" leading men on becoming a major issue in the trial. At least in this case, there was justice: Tyson was convicted in 1992 for the crime.

In September of 1991—and again, what the hell was going on in 1991?—there was also the infamous Tailhook Scandal, which involved more than one hundred U.S. Navy men and Marine Corps engaged in a sexual assault on some eightyseven women at the Tailhook Association Symposium.

In addition to these three examples, there was the matter of Shannon Faulkner, the first woman to be admitted to South Carolina's military academy, the Citadel, in 1995. She didn't make the cut and described emotional and psychological abuse from her peers. When she left the campus, male cadets cheered outright.

In context, one can certainly interpret the 1990s as "the angry white man gatekeeper" decade. Everyone who challenged the dominance of the white man was savagely attacked by forces of the extreme right. In response to programs like affirmative action or equal pay for equal work, conservatives complained again and again of "special interests" and "special rights" when that was never the matter in question. The matter of important was *equal* rights.

One response to this gatekeeper syndrome was the development of Third-wave feminism, a less strident brand of feminism that reconsidered, among other things, female involvement in pornography and yes, horror movies. It saw some success in 1992, "The Year of the Woman," when four women were elected to the United States Senate, joining the two who were already there.

Blood Games seems to understand the parameters of the battle of the sexes in the 1990s pretty well for a film so early during that span. It positions the baseball players as assertive but not obnoxious representations of femininity. They aren't looking for a fight, but they aren't going to stand for abuse and discrimination either. And the movie also understands that the men who object so mightily to feminism are likely those indoctrinated into the machismo tradition, either in the Deep South, or from the military.

Furthermore, the men cloak their dislike of women in terms of "justice," a talking point and distraction that is way off the mark. *Blood Games'* ultimate point may just be that women—working together—can best men, even those with military training.

At the end of the film, the movie pauses for a freeze-frame

montage remembering all the women who have died in this particular kerfuffle, and it's actually an affecting assemblage of footage. It suggests the women were fighting in a bigger cause than they realized.

All in all, this is a horror movie that is more than just watchable. It's compelling, entertaining and scary. And, yes, entirely exploitive.

***Blood Salvage* * * .**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Danny Nelson (Jake); Christian Hayser (Hiram); Ralph Pruitt-Vaughn (Roy); Lori Birdsong (April Evans); Ray Walston (Mr. Slone); Laura Whyte (Pat Evans); John Saxon (Clifford Evans); Andy Greenway (Bobby); Evander Holy -field (Boxer)

CREW: Paragon Arts International presents in association with High Five Productions a Ken C. Sanders Production. *Music:* Tim Templer. *Production Designer:* Robert Sussman. *Film Editor:* Jacquie Freeman Ross. *Director of Photography:* Michael Karp. *Executive Producers:* Ken Sanders, Evander Holyfield. *Written by:* Tucker Johnston, Ken Sanders. *Directed by:* Tucker Johnston. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After losing in the Stonewall County Peach Festival Beauty Contest, handicapped and wheelchair-bound teenager April Evans (Birdson) and her family head home for Atlanta in their RV. En route, they are waylaid by the murderous family of Jake, a local moonshiner and junkyard owner. Jake captures unsuspecting passersby and sells their organs to a mysterious buyer (Walston). He soon becomes obsessed with April. He wants to make her his bride and restore her ability to walk, even as he harvests the organs of her father (Saxon) and little brother in his barn operating room.

COMMENTARY: *Blood Salvage* is a horror movie decisively in the mold of Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) or Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977). It concerns a civilized family and

a savage family locked in an all-out battle for survival. Interestingly, *Blood Salvage* also picks up on the so-called Blue State/Red State, Liberal/ Conservative, City/Rural divide that was growing more pronounced in American politics in the 1990s.

The "civilized" family here (from Atlanta) does its all to support a handicapped daughter, even helping her compete in beauty contests because "everyone has talent." In other words, they are people living in the era of the Americans with Disabilities Act (which gets a plug in a sticker, here) and always believing in equal opportunity. The only problem is that April, the handicapped girl, is not 100 percent sure she wants what her meddling but well-meaning parents are peddling. She says she feels like a "cute little charity case."

Meanwhile, the savage family, headed by Jake, is overtly Christianist, and devoutly hypocritical. Jake wears a cap that reads "Jesus Saves" and constantly quotes scripture. At one point, he notes that "The Bible says we were all born into a state of sin," as if that excuses his various and sundry atrocities.

From his perch in his barn's operating room, Jake also is equipped with a microphone close at hand so he can preach to his cowed family and victims about Jesus. Yet like many Christianists, Jake's real motive is profit, not his stated philosophy that "those that have more ought to give to those who have less." Specifically, he steals the organs of passersby and sells the ill-gotten gains to a shadowy figure, Ray Walston, who represents either the same illuminati we see depicted in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation* (1995) or the black ops arm of Corporate America.

As is always the case in such movies, the two families reflect each other, like imperfect mirrors. April's opposite in Jake's family is also handicapped in a sense: the mentally retarded Roy. At one point, April tells him what she has heard *ad finitum*: that everyone has a handicap and everyone has a talent. Roy embraces this belief, but she's just trying to trick him so she can escape, an example, perhaps of her (liberal?) hypocrisy. She talks the talk but doesn't walk the walk.

Unsettling and unsavory, *Blood Salvage* certainly has its macabre moments, including a view of Elvis Presley trapped and paralyzed in Jake's barn. Yet overall the film is not as well crafted or as intense as its more notorious models, *Chainsaw* or *Hills*. It boasts the cutthroat *mentality*, certainly, especially since April's little brother, Bobby, gets his spinal fluid removed and then later turns up headless, but some aspects of the story are needlessly confusing or uncertain. For instance, Jake is able, indeed, to cure April's handicap, so he really is a medical genius. But how has he come to this incredible medical

knowledge? What's his trick? *Is God really on his side?* The movie doesn't let us know the answer and that seems like too important a plot point to gloss over.

Blood Salvage's script is not as sharp or as satirical as it could be and even though it features a great cast and impressive stunts, it doesn't leave the audience feeling wowed, or even particularly throttled.

You go in hoping for a *Motel Hell* (1980), but *Blood Salvage* just never quite gets to that inspired level of depravity.

***Blue Steel* * * ***

Critical Reception

"The intriguing aspect of *Blue Steel* is that it's a woman's cop movie, and this woman is as violent as any man we've seen on film. Jamie Lee Curtis is perfectly cast, but one wishes the script and Bigelow would have shown off more of Curtis's talent. Megan has the same instincts—and is as unstable—as the man she's out to get. Violence is resisted with violence. And men had better watch out."—Maria Garcia, *Films in Review*, June 7, 1990, page 365

"That the film is a genuine psycho-thriller and remains scary until the final moments is as clear a triumph of style over substance as you are apt to see this year."—Mike McGrady, *Newsday*, March 16, 1990, part 3, page 3

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jamie Lee Curtis (Megan Turner); Ron Silver (Eugene Hunt); Clancy Brown (Det. Nicholas Mann); Elizabeth Pena (Tracy Perez); Philip Bosco (Frank Truner); Richard Jenkins (Attorney Mel Dawson); Kevin Dunn (Asst. Chief Stanley Hoyt); Louise Fletcher (Shirley); Tom Sizemore (assailant).

CREW: Lightning Pictures in association with Precision films and Mack-Taylor productions present an Edward R. Pressman Production, a Kathryn Bigelow film. *Casting:* Risa Bramon, Billy Hopkins. *Associate*

Producers: Michael Flynn, Diane Schneider. *Music:* Brad Fiedel. *Film Editor:* Lee Percy. *Production Designer:* Toby Corbett. *Director of Photography:* Amir Mokri. *Executive Producer:* Lawrence Kassanoff. *Written by:* Kathryn Bigelow, Eric Red. *Produced by:* Edward R. Pressman, Oliver Stone. *Directed by:* Kathryn Bigelow. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A newly-graduated female cop, Megan Turner (Curtis), prevents an armed burglary in a grocery store by shooting the violent assailant. Unfortunately, one of the customers, a disturbed man named Eugene (Silver), takes the criminal's gun and becomes unhealthily obsessed with Megan. He goes on a killing spree with the weapon even as Megan finds herself in trouble with her peers because the man she shot was apparently unarmed. Soon, Eugene inserts himself into Megan's life and they even date for a time before Megan realizes she has become involved with a dangerous man and a stalker.

COMMENTARY: Jamie Lee Curtis portrayed Laurie Strode in *Halloween* (1978), a beloved character who remains one of the most memorable of the "final girl" archetypes of the slasher film paradigm. Given this association, it is both appropriate and resonant that the self-same actress would assay the role of Megan Turner, another endangered woman, in the 1990 horrorthriller *Blue Steel*.

In this film, another likeable Laurie Strodetype, the aforementioned Megan, has graduated from high school and is getting her feet wet in the male-dominated world of law enforcement. During the course of the movie, the audience learns that this newly minted cop faces a number of daunting challenges, encountering horrors unimagined by teenager Strode. She is sexually violated by a stalker in a brutal rape scene, made the object of sexual prejudice on the police force by a wrongheaded police superior and Internal Affairs, and even deemed unacceptable by a society at large, which would apparently prefer to "box up" women in traditional career roles like homemaker or office secretary.



Laurie Strode is all grown up ... and she's got a gun: Officer Megan Turner (Jamie Lee Curtis) takes aim at terror in Kathryn Bigelow's *Blue Steel* (1990).

Why? Well, a female cop "scares off " men, as Megan is thoughtfully informed by a prospective date named Howard. "Why would you want to become a cop?" He asks her with utter contempt. "You're a beautiful woman..."

By point of contrast, the slasher Michael Myers, whether deemed an unstoppable force of nature like the shark in *Jaws*, a supernatural Boogeyman, or a killer with the mentality of a child playing "trick or treat," never touched Laurie or Annie—or any other victim for that matter—in an overtly sexual manner. He never threatened to destroy a woman's standing in society. His threat was simple though inescapable: a big, sharp kitchen knife matched with the desire and strength to kill.

By the early 1990s and the era of Anita Hill, that existential threat had grown much more personal in that it is actually Megan's body and sexual identity that is imperiled by the villain. Megan's attempt to "be strong" has, in fact, rendered her a pariah. This unacceptable notion (a woman cop) is what draws the moth to the flame. It brings the killer's obsession into focus.

Directed by 2009 Academy Award-winning best director Kathryn Bigelow, *Blue Steel* is Megan's story of self realization. She quickly finds herself in trouble with her superiors in the police department because it now appears she killed an unarmed man. Her judgment is questioned. Since she's a woman, they wonder: did she "panic" when confronted with a crime, and thus kill a man unnecessarily?

That's the question, arisen from our society's preconceived notions of male/ female roles. A man's control of his emotions and particularly his fear wouldn't be questioned quite so readily or so enthusiastically.

So while Megan is suspended for the unauthorized use of the deadly force, her stalker, Hunt, begins to randomly kill people on the streets ... and inscribes his bullets with Megan's name. At the same time, Megan begins dating Eugene— who works on Wall Street— unaware that he is actually the wolf in sheep's clothing, the menacing interloper systematically taking apart her life.

Hunt, the so-called "44 Magnum Killer" and Megan, the female cop, soon share a "You Made Me/I Made You" dynamic (a term cribbed from dialogue in 1989's *Batman*), which finally ends in a fierce shoot-out balancing Eugene's "weapon" (his gun) against Megan's.

Eugene, threatened and attracted by the show of force represented by a female cop, now feels the need to assert his dominance over her by using the same tool to destroy her. In other words, this is a pissing contest. Eugene is threatened because a woman has dared to wield more power than he. He is abetted by a society which also disapproves of a man's "power" in the hands of a female. And yep, those big silver guns are definitely phallic symbols.

Blue Steel is undeniably a child of *Fatal Attraction* (1987), and highly indicative of 1990s horror cinema in that it concerns monstrous psychotics making in-roads into middle-class society, the work-place and suburban homes. Unlike Michael Myers or other slashers, however, the "bogeymen" of this age—the interlopers—are not faceless goons moving in shadow and darkness, but rather colorful maniacs boasting definable, specific psychological disorders which you'll find in the DSM IV.

This evolution of the slasher is a good development for actors, though not necessarily the committed horror fan, and *Blue Steel* clearly represents the knife's edge between the thriller/ horror genres.

The horror genre is at its best and most effective when motives, movements and explanations are ambiguous. We don't know what Michael Myers "is." He is metaphorically and literally "the Shape," a mystery wrapped in an enigma wearing a white mask. Murderers like Eugene in *Blue Steel* lack that same sense of ambiguity (and hence, intrinsic menace), the sense that the killer could be something more than human or less than human.

And films like *Blue Steel*, since they delve into psychology, tend to provide concrete reasons behind a killer's anti-social behavior. For

instance, in *Blue Steel*, Eugene takes a night-time tour of Manhattan by helicopter. "When you're way up here, looking down at people," he says to Megan, his companion, "they're just little specks ... like they don't matter much."

That's a manifesto, a movie diagnosis of the God Complex. And while interesting in terms of characterization, the sense of horror (if not tension and anxiety) is diminished. We fear that which we can't understand or rationalize (like the Blair Witch, the shark in *Jaws* or Michael Myers). Oppositely, understanding curtails fear.

Blue Steel still works on a highly symbolic level. Basically, this is a film about a phallic symbol, the gun, and who is permitted to touch and harness it. It's about a woman who dares to wield that power and a threatened man who is so tantalized and uncorked by her wielding of it that he feels it necessary to dominate her and put her in "her place" with his own "weapon." That may sound like feminist gobbledygook, but it's actually a fairly close reading of the film's imagery.

Eugene is so diminished by Megan's use of the gun and the authority it brings her that he stands before a mirror playing with his own ... gun. He also works out, lifting weights, making himself feel more masculine and physically powerful in the process.

"You are God," he assures himself. "You are unique ... they will fear your name." The implication is that he can't be feared—can't be respected—so long as a woman treads into the territory he feels is his. That's why he becomes hell bent on destroying or "owning" Megan. She's trespassing into a domain that should, by nature, belong to him (he feels).

Before he has sex with Megan, Eugene also—perhaps paradoxically—asks her to keep the gun on for love making. He caresses it and feels it in its holster, asking her not to remove it. If this isn't an acknowledgment of the power of the phallus in our society—to both sexes—I don't know what is.

As the film ends, the competition for domination of the phallus, of the gun, comes to a climax (did I just write that? Damn!). Shorn of her responsibilities as a police officer, Megan takes the law into her own hands, just as a male movie icon like Clint Eastwood or Charles Bronson would also unquestioningly do at this juncture in the narrative and decides it is time for action.

She fights a man explicitly on a man's territory: violence, vengeance ... and heavy fire-arms. What the film successfully captures here, and that which I think is highly important, is the idea that this might not be the best way to handle things. The power of the gun and the bullet is a terrible one to wield—and not to be taken lightly.

This fact is realized in the final shoot-out, a sustained, tense bloodbath depicted for longstretches in slow-motion photography. Bigelow's selection of technique (slow-motion) diagrams in loving, gory detail just how utterly destructive guns can be.

Indeed, the thematic apex of *Blue Steel* is the audience rumination that perhaps Megan has been wrong to pursue the male power as her own. Not because a woman shouldn't wield a gun, but because maybe no one should. The terror of bullet wounds and blood: it's anti-human, corrupt. When Megan finally takes out the murderous maniac Eugene at point-blank range and the slasher conceit of *The Killer Who Won't Die/The Sting in the Tail/Tale* rears its ugly head, is it a moral victory? It's the end of the film, and the credits roll, but what does the audience learn?

I believe this was not a victory for Megan, rather another skirmish in the battle of the sexes, and a telling one at that. A woman can be just as violent, irrational and impulsive as any man. That, perhaps, is one definition of "equality" in 1990s America: the privilege and right to kill. Praise God and pass the ammunition.

***Brain Dead* * * .**

Critical Reception

"Roger Corman protégé Adam Simon whipped up this surprisingly intelligent b-movie based on a *Twilight Zone*-esque screenplay by the late Charles Beaumont. In hindsight, it's easy to compare it to David Lynch's *Lost Highway*; both films star Bill Pullman as an increasingly paranoid, possibly schizophrenic loner who's desperately trying to make sense of strange events that have turned his life upside down. The beauty of both films lies in the way they manipulate the audience, putting us inside the mind of the protagonist and making us feel just as desperate, confused and fearful as he does. In day to day life, we have the ability to distinguish what's real and what isn't. But what happens when something goes wrong inside our own brain? The way we see the world changes and reality isn't what it used to be. Simon's film ultimately prompts us to question our own perspective on reality. That's a very compelling subject for a very worthwhile horror film."—Joseph Maddrey, author *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bill Pullman (Dr. Rex Martin); Bill Paxton (Jim); Bud Cort (Halsey); Patricia Charbonneau (Dana); Nicholas Pryor (Conklin); George Kennedy (Cyril Vance); Brian Brophy (Ellis); Lee Arenberg (Sachs); Maud Winchester (Crazy Anne); Willie Garson (Board Member) Brent Hinckley (Dewey).

CREW: Concorde/MGM and United Artists Presents. *Associate Producer:* Lynn Whitney. *Production Designer:* Catherine Hardwicke. *Director of Photography:* Ron Schmidt. *Story by:* Charles Beaumont. *Written by:* Charles Beaumont and Adam Simon. *Produced by:* Julie Corman. *Directed by:* Adam Simon. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

INCANTATION: "Madness is merely moisture on the brain."—Dr. Rex Martin contemplates the nature of sanity in *Brain Dead*.

SYNOPSIS: Neurosurgeon Dr. Rex Martin (Pullman) is tasked by the malevolent Eunice Corp with restoring the fragile mind of a genius, Halsey (Cort), after he committed the murder of his family and went insane. Apparently, the good doctor has an equation stored in his mind that the Board at Eunice desperately wants and needs. After experimental brain surgery, Martin is successful, but he begins to experience visions of the blood madman whom Halsey claims really killed his wife and children. Before long, Rex is facing a reality in which he himself is the mad Halsey, and his real life is nothing but a hallucination.

COMMENTARY: "Every brain is a record of a life," the audience is informed in *Brain Dead*, an intriguing mind-trip from director Adam Simon and *Twilight Zone* producer Charles Beaumont.

That statement seems a good starting point for the film, and yet, ultimately (a little bit like *Jacob's Ladder* [1990]), the movie can't quite deliver on all its inherent promise because its primary aim is to distract and misdirect, not legitimately create a "record of a life" that

seems plausible or even coherent. At the end of the movie, the audience receives an answer for the preceding ninety minutes, but not a wrap-up that explains much of anything specific. The movie is trippy and phantasmagoric, but not especially lucid.

Specifically, *Brain Dead* is the story of a brilliant scientist, Dr. Rex Martin (Bill Pullman), who is involved in a terrible car accident and whose mind is irrevocably shattered. Trapped in a coma on an operating table, he loses grip on his identity. He believes he is a different person, and he even imagines himself a terrible murderer. Rex dies on the table, finally, and in a supremely ironic *Twilight Zone*-style moment, the surgeon toiling on him suggests emptily that he "didn't feel any pain." Well, we know differently, and that's the point.

The movie ably dramatizes Rex Martin's suffering, his attempts to re-assert his own sense of personal reality after the accident scatters it to the four winds. With the brain damaged, life is miserable, the movie suggests. Or as Martin also asserts, "all that we suffer and enjoy comes from the brain and its condition."

Yet here's the crux of the issue: *Brain Dead* does not simply desire to be a cinematic tour through the twisted corridors of consciousness and identity. On the contrary, it also hauls in all of this abundant sci-fimaterial of the "science gone amok" variety, with an evil corporation planning to rewrite human brains ("The New You ... from Eunice") at retail clinics where customers can change their personalities via brain surgery.

Also, Dr. Martin, pre-accident, is assigned to lobotomize a man who is a serial killer, Halsey (Cort), and then acquire an important equation from his mind. Yet Cort is insane (or at least a paranoid schizophrenic) and claims to be pursued by the real killer ... whom Martin also sees in the flesh. At some point during Martin's epiphany, he even becomes Halsey himself, a fact which doesn't sit very well with him.

The upshot of this material is that the movie lingers on issues that ultimately don't matter or contribute to the movie's central idea of the brain's final struggle with life. We don't need all these other bells-and-whistles, and certainly not the dull corporate boardroom sequences, since they just prove confusing and contradictory.

Is Halsey real? Is Eunice real? Are the retail clinics real? Is the "kinder and gentler" lobotomy of Martin's creation real? In asking these questions, we don't ask the most important ones: who is Rex Martin, really? How does he see himself and his life?

Sometimes the movie truly does get at Rex Martin's condition and personal fears. The vision of his wife cheating on him is

emblematic of the man's apparent characteristic paranoia ("Nobody knows more about paranoia than you," he is told). It's something personal within him, and how he views the world, and it's important.

The charting of Rex's mental landscape in *Brain Dead* permits the director to indulge in some great visuals, and it seems that's really the movie's *raison d'être*. A simple walk into a closet becomes a fall into infinity, into a cloudy sky. The mental ward becomes, in some fashion, an expression of the corridors of Martin's brain. And there's a lovely shot at the end of the film in which a butterfly alights on Martin's head, either a fantasy made manifest through the power of his thought or a symbol of his soul moving on to another realm.

In true mind-bending fashion, events repeat in *Brain Dead*, different actors play the same role, and an office appears to be in the wrong building. Anything can happen, and it often does, but the final revelation *that it's all a dream* essentially seems hackneyed and much too simple to cover all the goings-on in the film.

When *Brain Dead* trades explicitly in Rex's personal fears and terrors (alienation from his wife, guilt over a phantasm of violence against her, etc.), the movie works as the individual death dream of one man. When the makers throw in all the B-movie shlock, it just seems like the movie is trying to out-smart the audience. Why would a dying man dream of an equation that doesn't exist? Or an encounter with a man he has never met? *Or another man's boogeyman?*

Just a few shades shy of coherent, *Brain Dead* is still an enjoyable horror movie and one welldirected and well-performed. It also affords actor Bill Paxton one of the best entrance lines of all time: "The universe is just a wet dream."

If you stop seeking concrete sense in *Brain Dead*, and remember Paxton's colorful description of the universe, you may find yourself more willing to accept the movie's overly circuitous path to linear storytelling.

***Bride of Re- Animator* * * .**

Critical Reception

"Directed by *Re-Animator's* producer, Brian Yuzna, the sequel limps along on obvious laughs; scenes are blocked with as much punch as a Sally Struthers vocational-training ad. Even the

reliable Combs and Abbott bring a too cozy, even tired familiarity to their roles...."—Manohla Dargis, *Village Voice*, March 5, 1991, page 54

"While it's not Stuart Gordon's original, there are things to be said for this sequel. As a *Bride of Frankenstein* rehash, it's a fitting continuation on the original. It's always nice to see Jeffrey Combs playing Herbert West and he clearly has fun with the role here. The most fitting compliment to this film is that it hits you with the unexpected, much as the original did, and seeing David Gale's Dr. Hill with batwings attached to his noggin is certainly not what one might have expected to see (but more David Gale would have been nice). While definitely more tongue-in-cheek than its predecessor, perhaps lacking in the fright department, Brian Yuzna certainly captures the feel of the original. Having Barbara Crampton back would have made this film even better, though."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bruce Abbott (Dan Cain); Claude Earl Jones (Lt. Leslie Chapham); Fabiana Udenio (Francesca); David Gale (Dr. Hill); Kathleen Kinmont (Gloria); Mel Stewart (Dr. Wilbur Graves); Jeffrey Combs (Dr. Herbert West); Irene Forrest (Nurse Shelley); Michael Strasser (Ernest); Marge Turner (Mrs. Chapham); Johnny Legend (Skinny Corpser).

CREW: Vestron Video, Wildstreet Pictures Present a Keith Walley, Paul White Production of a Brian Yuzna Film. *Castings:* Billy Damota. *Special Make-up Effects:* Screaming Mad George, KNB EFX Group, David Allen, Magical Media Industries, Anthony Doublin. *Music:* Richard Band. *Film Editor:* Peter Teschner. *Production Designer:* J.C. Duffin. *Director of Photography:* Rick Fichter. *Executive Producer:* Paul White, Keith Walley. *Story adapted from H.P. Lovecraft's* Herbert West, Re-Animator *by:* Woody Keith, Rick Fry and Brian Yuzna. *Produced and directed by:* Brian Yuzna. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Eight months after the massacre at Miskatonic University, the obsessed revivers of the dead, Herbert West (Combs) and Dan Cain

(Abbott) resume their gruesome experiments in life-prolongation. While the duo develops a new re-animating reagent from the amniotic fluid of an iguana, the police, led by the suspicious Chapham (Earl Jones), question the men about their roles in the massacre. Dan attempts to romance a new love interest, Francesa (Udenio) from Peru, even as Dr. Hill—a severed head—is once more re-animated to make trouble.

COMMENTARY: As given life by the talented Jeffrey Combs, Dr. Herbert West is the ultimate optimist. Every time West attempts to bring about the "re-animation of dead tissue," his experiments go terribly wrong, people die horribly, and he must wrestle with kinetic, self-aware body parts like spring-loaded intestines.

Still, this doesn't dissuade Dr. West from the effort. He's perpetually one breakthrough away from success ... and he just knows it!

West is a great character in Combs' clever, capable hands, and *The Re-Animator* (1985) was a terrific horror film. It practically burst at the seams (like those spring-loaded intestines) with energy, ingenuity and gory invention.

Combs resurrects West to fine effect in this sequel, *Bride of Re-Animator*, but most of the franchise's energy, ingenuity and gory invention is gone. There's just something a bit tired and dreary about the movie. The intestines are flaccid.

The original movie was daring and funny in a straight-faced fashion. The sequel ups the humor quotient, but not all the actors involved are as deft as Combs in conveying the essence of high camp. Combs seems to understand that it is his job to play West with utter sincerity, optimism and purity, and let the humor take care of itself, a byproduct of his careful approach. The other performances are not nearly so well-calibrated (particularly Earl Jones'), though Bruce Abbott is still good as West's straight man, Dan Cain.

Set eight months after the Miskatonic massacre, *Bride of Re-Animator* finds West and Cain resuming their "morbid doodling with human body parts." This is a messy endeavor, and one of the film's best and funniest moments finds West attempting to re-assure his friend that their experiments won't be discovered. "The police will never come here," he promises.

A second later, the doorbell rings.

It's the police. Once more, West's eternal optimism meets with reality, and doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

Designed in part as a tribute to *Bride of Frankenstein* (1933), *Bride of Re-Animator* is a smart sequel, but not always a deft one. The Chapham character is a weak, dull opponent for West, and the movie only really seems to truly live and breathe when it picks up on the academic rivalry between West and his old nemesis, Dr. Hill (David Gale).

The heart of this movie should be Dan's attempt to transplant the heart of his one true love, Meg, in a patient body's, but one way or another, the love story fails to impress. Perhaps that's because West is the more compelling personality in this duo, and he pulls the viewer into his orbit. All eyes go to Combs, even unconsciously, because West proves such a delight and source of chaos.

A sub-par sequel to a good movie, *Bride of Re-Animator* reveals, if nothing else, the 1990s horror movie in search of its identity. It's based on literary source material (belonging to H.P. Lovecraft) and deals with the familiar "science run amok" trope. Yet the movie knowingly descends into silliness and self-referential laughs. What's lost in that comedic approach, unfortunately, is— as we saw in *Basket Case 2*— the film's capacity to frighten and surprise. Those missing qualities are the very ones that informed the original film.

Re-Animator was like a breath of fresh air. *Bride of Re-Animator* just isn't animated enough.

A Cat in the Brain (a.k.a. Nightmare Concert) * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lucio Fulci (Himself); David L. Thompson (Psychiatrist); Jeffery Kennedy (Il poliziotto); Melissa Lango (La Moglie); Ria De Simone (La Soprano); Brett Halsey (The Monster); Sacha Darwin (La donna infornate); Robert Egon (Il Secondo Mostro); Shillett Angel (il produttore); Paolo Cozzo (l'infermiera).

CREW: Grindhouse and Executive Centre srl present a Lucio Fulci film. *Story and screenplay by:* Lucio Fulci and John Fitzsimmons. *With collaboration by:* Antonio Tentori. *Director of Photography:* Alessandro Grossi. *Film Editor:* Vincenzo Tomassi. *Production Supervisor:* Camilla Fulci. *Music:* Ribot, srl. *Produced by:* Luigi

Namerini, Anthony Clear. *Directed by*: Lucio Fulci. *MPAA Rating*: UR. *Running time*: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On the set of his new genre film, Italian horror movie director Lucio Fulci (himself) begins to experience horrible visions of fear related to the gory images he has put to celluloid. Fulci goes to visit a psychiatrist (Thompson) for assistance resolving his issue, but the good doctor is actually a bad doctor: a psychotic killer bent on committing bloody murder and framing Fulci for his crimes. He hypnotizes Fulci to believe that he is culpable for death and destruction.

COMMENTARY: Hell hath no fury like an Italian horror movie fan scorned. I learned this important lesson the hard way after I penned negative reviews of some Mario Bava and Lucio Fulci films in *Horror Films of the 1970s* and *Horror Films of the 1980s*.

Those honest, candid assessments—apparently interpreted as the personal negation of a life's work and interest—have earned me the enduring enmity of one angry anonymous blogger and one prominent horror periodical ... though perhaps they are actually two heads of the same Hydra. Hard to tell for sure when a critic hides behind anonymity.

But so be it. Not all Italian horrors are created equal, and I'm happily on record as appreciating many Bava movies and at least a few Fulci films, particularly *Zombi* (1979) and *House by the Cemetery* (1983).

Even those interesting horrors, however, showcase Fulci's vast weaknesses as a filmmaker. As an artist, he boasts virtually no concept of pace and timing, and his films feature weak, incomprehensible and nonsensical narratives. Then there's Fulci's lingering, obsessive attention to gore. It fails to forge terror, but rather raises awareness of just how phony the special effects appear.

Additionally, the dialogue in Fulci's films is more often than not utterly atrocious, or at least laughable. I point to *The Beyond* (1981), a film that many horror fans absolutely adore and cherish. Yet it features the immortal line "You have carte blanche but not a blank check."

And then there's *The Beyond's* zombie problem. The characters in the film keep noting that they have to shoot the undead in the head ... yet then keep resolutely shooting them in the torso anyway. Were these dramatic and (unintentionally comedic) failings to appear in Uwe Boll films or a Paul W.S. Anderson film, we'd never hear the end of it from fanboys. But Fulci gets a pass, at least in certain circles.

Given my reservations about Fulci's cinematic oeuvre, I wasn't exactly looking forward to *A Cat in the Brain* (1990) but was ultimately pleasantly surprised. The film still features many of Fulci's trademark weaknesses. At the same time, however, it nudges the genre itself—and indeed, international cinema—forward into the 1990s with a self-reflexive quality that forecasts both *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* in 1994 and Woody Allen's *Deconstructing Harry* in 1997.

Specifically, Fulci's *A Cat in the Brain* concerns the manner in which an artist's work bleeds directly into his life ... whether he desires it to or not. Fulci plays himself in his film (as Allen and Craven would soon play themselves), and he's a likable and laidback presence. Everything and everyone in the film orbits around Fulci. He's our anchor to reality, even as his personal sense of reality seems to slip away before our eyes. I got a real kick out of the moments in which Fulci as director makes himself, the man, the film's evildoer, and runs over innocent victims with his car or gropes a documentary producer because he thinks he's appearing in a Nazi orgy scene.

Clearly, the man is having fun. And really, why shouldn't he? Poking fun at himself only makes Fulci that much more approachable at least as far as I'm concerned.

A Cat in the Brain actually showcases Fulci's sense of humor, and it's another genuine revelation. When he begins slipping into the gory reality of his films, for instance, Fulci also falls into a dangerous land of familiar genre clichés. Specifically, his car won't start at a critical moment! D'oh!

Fulci also develops an aversion to the buzz of chainsaws and the look of steak tartar. Too much gore on the brain, Lucio...

Honestly, I even appreciate how skillfully Fulci deploys gore in *A Cat in the Brain*. As the film opens, Fulci sits at his desk composing a litany of terrors to unleash (torturing, burning, decapitation...) upon, naturally, an unlucky female character (an allusion to feminist complaints about his movies) while the camera zooms in, rather awkwardly, on his bald-spot. Then we're actually *inside* his spaghetti-red brain, and a cat appears there. The fake-looking feline puppet begins to scrape its paws through his juicy brainmatter, and then

starts eating it.

This is just ... ridiculous, but the gore has a point. Fulci believes his work has infected him, and this visual is a perfect metaphor for that: *catscratch fever*, a symbol of the supernatural taking up residence in his thoughts.

Even Fulci's neurotic worry about the impact of smoking on his health is a delightful throwaway moment. He's surrounded by death, destruction, "Naziism and Sadism," and yet he's focused entirely on the harmful effects of nicotine. But that's part of the movie's didactic message: nicotine is indeed much more harmful than anything you will find in the horror genre, despite what social critics would like people to believe. They insist that "seeing violence on the screen provokes violence," but smokers actually put toxins inside their body ... not just metaphorical cats in their brains.

It's all kind of ... charming and ironic. After everything Fulci has inflicted on audiences over the years, it's somehow fitting punishment that he must experience his own movies as vivid, brutal hallucinations.

And the movie-within-a-movie structure of *Cat in the Brain* works in spades, so that percipients aren't exactly certain where reality ends and fiction begins. The coda on Fulci's yacht, named *Perversion*, is a perfect capper to the film. A murder that occurs there seems entirely possible and probable given what we've seen of Fulci in the movie, but then we hear the word "cut" and realize that the entire film has been another moviewithin-a-movie.

Yes, yes, *A Cat in the Brain* is as sloppy as Fulci's other works. The film's plot wraps up with a one-line bit of exposition: the evil psychiatrist framing Fulci was caught by the police, we're told. We don't see the capture; we don't see the psychiatrist's demise. We're just politely informed of it.

And the actual murder scenes are set-aside set-pieces. We are introduced to random people, then watch as the psychiatrist stalks them, and a guilty-feeling Lucio Fulci wanders into the sequence, appear shocked and horrified. This happens with a prostitute, at the boat-yard, and in a car-based sequence. The overall impression is of a plot wandering from moment to moment without much rhyme or reason.

But again, that loose structure works in *A Cat in the Brain* because the subject of the film is Fulci's slippage from reality to fantasy (or to horror, as the case may be). The plot need not be strung together tightly to work: the repetitive, set-piece approach harks back to Fulci's other films and simultaneously reminds us of how fragile

Fulci's grip on reality may be, given his hypnosis by the evil doctor.

Woody Allen undergoes a similar identity crisis in *Deconstructing Harry* (1997), as a writer who has "fictionalized" his life to such an extent that he can't remember who is real, and who is a fictionalized *interpretation* of real. Fulci's film isn't as good or as funny at that effort, but it is undeniably a trailblazer and even rehabilitates Fulci for those who don't have a special liking for him.

It's tougher to criticize a film when a director seems to be making all your points for you, acknowledging his own limitations and putting himself out there as center of his creative universe. Like I said, it's kind of charming.

And that's the last thing I ever expected to write about a Lucio Fulci film.

***Child's Play 2: Chucky's Back* * * .**

Critical Reception

"It's an all out horror film—handsomely produced but morbid and not in the least amusing to watch.... The film belongs to Vincent, a remarkably resilient and tenacious young actor, and to newcomer Elise, who has something of the engaging brashness of Britain's Emily Lloyd."—Kevin Thomas, *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 1990, calendar, page 8

"Scenes of the doll doing horrible things are either scary or pretty hilarious, depending on the mood of the viewer. The best part is a suspenseful end sequence set in an automated factory turning out more Chuckies."—Michael Weldon, *The Psychotronic Video Guide*. St. Martin's Griffin, 1996, page 104

Cast and Crew

CAST: Alex Vincent (Andy Barclay); Jenny Agutter (Joanne Simpson); Gerrit Graham (Philip Simpson); Christine Elise (Kyle); Grace Zabriskie (Grace Poole); Beth Grante (Miss Kettlewell); Peter Haskell (Sullivan); Greg Germann (Mattson); Brad Dourif (Chucky/Charles Lee Ray).

CREW: Universal Pictures Presents a David Kirschner Production of a John Lafia Film. *Casting:* Karen Rea. *Chucky Doll created by:* David Kirschner. *Chucky designed and engineered by:* Kevin Yagher. *Music:* Graeme Revell. *Film Editor:* Edward Warschilka. *Production Designer:* Ivo Cristante. *Director of Photography:* Stefan Czapsky. *Executive Producer:* Robert Latham Brown. *Co-Producer:* Laura Miskowitz. *Based on characters created by:* Don Mancini. *Written by:* Don Mancini. *Produced by:* David Kirschner. *Directed by:* John Lafia. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After surviving a life-and-death struggle with the killer Good Guys doll named Chucky (Dourif), little Andy Barclay (Vincent) moves in with the Simpsons, a foster family, while his mother undergoes court-ordered psychiatric evaluation. Meanwhile, Play Pals Company rebuilds Chucky, and he quickly escapes from custody and locates Andy so he can carry out the voodoo ritual that will allow him to move his soul into the boy's body. After Chucky kills Andy's foster parents (Agutter, Graham), Andy finds an unlikely ally in his tough foster sister, Kyle (Elise), and wages a final battle against Chucky on the Good Guys factory assembly line.

COMMENTARY: That rascally killer doll Chucky returns for a nefarious game of "Hide the Soul" in this efficient first sequel to 1988's smash hit, *Child's Play*. The original film, directed by Tom Holland, was a work of pure genius, poking wicked fun at the 1980s Cabbage Patch Doll Craze. The sequel isn't in the same league, either in execution or in leavening social commentary, but in the 1990s, beggars can't be choosers and *Child's Play 2* gets the job done with an admirable degree of charm and intensity.

In particular, *Child's Play 2: Chucky's Back* is a strong closer. In terms of denouement, it offers a dynamic and wacky set-piece in which imperiled youngsters Andy and Kyle face off against Chucky inside a vast, Warner Bros. cartoon-style factory. This setting is replete with inhumanly bright primary colors, a non-stop assembly line of Chucky dolls in mid-construction, and some great gags involving hot wax, a stitching machine, a useful "reverse" button on the factory floor and the ultimate *coup de grâce*: an eyeball "insertor" device.

Stacked floor-to-ceiling with boxed Chucky dolls, this Good Guys

factory is essentially the equivalent of an industrial maze, like the hedge in Kubrick's *The Shining*. Lafia's rocketing steady -cam pursues the fleeing protagonists around corners, up and down slides, and the set-piece also utilizes ramps and hatchways that make the setting feel like a Chutes-and-Ladders board game writ large. Chucky's demise in this cartoon setting is suitably epic and gruesome, and the film's whole last act feels remarkably inspired.

At other points, *Child's Play 2* is clever enough to pass muster. The okay screenplay makes a point of referencing Pinocchio, from another story in which a "doll" wants to become a real boy. Of course, Chucky is a twisted reflection of that literary character, hoping to become "real" by essentially killing and replacing "the real boy."



Most assuredly not your friend till the end. The devil doll Chucky returns in *Child's Play 2* (1990).

Smartly, the movie also gets the audience on Andy's side quickly. Again and again, he's punished and berated by adults for acts that aren't his fault, like coloring a picture at school with the legend "Fuck You Bitch!" Again and again we feel his pain, to quote a Clintonism. Whether at school or on the job, we all know that terrible feeling of being bullied, disbelieved or blamed for someone else's mistake.

Alex Vincent and Christine Elise do a serviceable job in the lead roles, though they can't quite make up for the absence of Catherine

Hicks and Chris Sarandon. Still, it is easy to empathize with their plight as foster kids, and audiences will want to see them succeed. You'll feel invested enough in them that the movie scares you more often than not. There's a great moment on a backyard swing that involves Elise's discovery of a second Chucky doll named Tommy, and Lafia mines it for maximum suspense.

Lafia's compositions are similarly strong throughout the film, which gives the sequel a powerful visual edge. There's one great shot from Tommy's point of view in the grave, as Chucky throws dirt on the camera while burying it and laughing maniacally. The macabre image is made subtly funny by the fact that Chucky is using a toy Good Guys™ shovel to bury his doppelganger. The opening shot, a fast retracting close-up away from Chucky's eyeball and scarred skull, is also stylish.

Unfortunately, these well-staged moments tend to accent the moments that don't quite work. For instance, over the opening credits, the film shoots in close-up as technicians at Play Pals meticulously rebuild Chucky, piece by piece. They even scrape his teeth.

For one thing, this is ridiculous: why would anyone reassemble a doll that even the police believe is responsible for a crime spree? What's the upside here? That he comes back to life and kills you?

And secondly, when Chucky predictably acts badly and a technician is electrocuted, the moment is so ineptly staged and shot (and features such poor opticals) that it plays like parody. It takes a while for the movie to recover from this goofy moment.

Andy's foster parents, unfortunately named "the Simpsons" (D'oh!), are pretty two-dimensional and dense too, never taking Andy's word and always coming to the exact wrong conclusion. Some people expect this sort of stupidity from horror movies, but the genre is at its best when it rises above clichés, not when it blindly reinforces them.

The *Child's Play 2* script also boasts its share of contrivances. Notably that Chucky and Andy should disembark from a passing truck at just the right moment to get them to the Play Pals factory. Convenient.

All in all, one might hope that *Child's Play 2* would boast the wit and intelligence of its direct predecessor, and that didn't happen. Again, its greatest strength is that it goes out on a high note of terror and fun. John Lafia, Don Mancini and Don Kirschner didn't build a better dollhouse here, but it's not exactly a ramshackle construction either.

Dead Alive * * .

Critical Reception

"Jackson, obviously aware of the cliché-ridden dangers of 'horror comedies,' chucks convention and good taste out of the window and goes for the gusto (or is that 'gutso?') with uncanny results. The film moves from gag to gore to gag again like a rocket from the crypt and never lets up—just when you think you've seen the worst, Jackson tops himself and there you are squirming in your seat again (and loving every minute of it). Sick. Perverse. Brilliant."—Marc Savlov, *The Austin Chronicle*, April 16, 1993.
[http: //austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Calen darFilm?Film = oid %3A139453](http://austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Calen%20darFilm?Film=oid%3A139453)

"If Monty Python ever made a horror flick, this would've been the result. An oasis of gore and pitch-black humor amidst the relatively tame early '90s horror landscape. The infamous Baby Selwyn park scene contains some of the most effective slapstick ever put on the screen. Could very well be the most explicitly violent film ever made, although it is so over-the-top as to be a complete cartoon."— Brian Solomon, *The VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Timothy Balme (Lionel); Diane Penalver (Paquita); Elizabeth Moody (Mum); Ian Watkin (Uncles Les); Stuart Devengue (Father McGruder); Brenda Rendall (Nurse McTavish); Jed Brody (Vod); Stephen Papps (Zombie MacGruder); Murney Keane (Scoate); Glenis Levestram (Mrs. Matheson); Lewis Rowe (Mr. Matheson); Elizabeth Mullane (Rita); Harry Sinclair (Roger); Davina Whitthouse (Grandmother); Nick Ward (Spud).

CREW: Trimark Pictures Presents a Wingut Production in association with the New Zealand Film Commission and Avalan/NFU Studios. *Associate Producer:* Jamie Silkirk. *Prosthetics and Make-up:* Bob McCarron, Marjory Hamlin. *Creature and Gore Effects:* Richard Taylor. *Production Designer:* Kevin Leonard-Jones. *Music:* Peter Iasent. *Director of Photography:* Murray Milne. *Film Editor:* Jamie Silkirk. *Written by:* Stephen Sinclair, Frances Walsh, Peter Jackson. *From an original story by:* Stephen Sinclair. *Produced by:* Jim Booth. *Directed by:* Peter

Jackson. *MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 97 minutes.*

SYNOPSIS: In Wellington, New Zealand, a henpecked young man Lionel (Balme) sees his life go from bad to worse when his domineering mother turns into a rabid zombie after being bitten by a Sumatran rat monkey at the zoo. Worse, this occurs just when Lionel is beginning a romantic relationship with the lovely Paquita (Penalver). Soon, Mum's madness has spread, and zombies overrun Lionel's house. Unless he miraculously develops a backbone, Lionel will find himself right back in his (zombie) mother's womb...

COMMENTARY: Director Peter Jackson boasts a devoted following in the horror genre and the fandom is well deserved. However, even Jackson's most accomplished films sometimes feel like hand-me-down versions of better, more inventive Sam Raimi pictures.

Case in point : Jackson's highly-regarded *Dead Alive* is perhaps the goriest, slimiest, and bloodiest movie ever made, and it certainly deserves hosannas for the spurting mucus, the flood of embalming fluid, and the absolutely bravura gore-in-the-custard dining room table sequence.

Yep, there's imagination to burn here, and Jackson even finds an inventive visual way to literalize the term "going back to the womb" and make it utterly disgusting ... and funny.

What differentiates Jackson from Raimi, however, is that the latter has a keen sense of when enough is enough, and orchestrates his movies and his moves appropriately. Raimi doesn't tell the same joke over-and-over again until it grows tiresome. And Raimi also evidences a superior understanding of pace and acceleration. His movies build and develop into insanity whereas Jackson's films remain at maximum frenzy throughout. The ironic and contradictory result of this quality is that Jackson's movies—with the gas pressed to the floorboard all the time—often end up feeling boring and stagnant after about a half-hour of wacky hijinks.

The lesson: if absolutely everything is utterly disgusting, over-the-top, and insane, *nothing* is. There's no high point.

I bring up the comparison to Raimi for two reasons. First, the director of *Drag Me to Hell* (2009) is famous for presenting down-in-

the-mouth, schlumpy heroes who evidence a heightened sense of (antiquated) chivalry, but who are really losers. In a nutshell, this was Ash (Bruce Campbell) in the original *Evil Dead* (1983), Vic (Reed Birney) in *Crimewave* (1985), and even Peter Parker in the *Spider-Man* films. This character type is an update of the 1950s-era cliché of the loveable loser; the not-quite Alpha male who overcomes some inherent character flaws and impediments in his life to beat the bad guy and get the girl. The movie represents his process of becoming a hero ... a winner. In the end, he usually beats the bad guy and gets the girl.

And Lionel (Timothy Balme) is precisely this Raimi character in *Dead Alive*, a loveable loser who must battle his overbearing shrew of a mother to find happiness with the love of his life. He's a second-rate Raimi hero all the way.

Secondly, in charting the hero's flawed nature, Sam Raimi puts him (or her) through some real slapstick travails, literally gymnastic ones based on the films of The Three Stooges. This means that Ash must battle his own severed hand in *Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn* (1987). This means that buried, bony skeletons poke Ashe in the eye, and pick his nose, and manipulate funny expressions out of his protesting mouth in *Army of Darkness* (1991). This also means that the forces of Evil humiliate Ash at every opportunity, covering him in gruel, chunks and viscous fluids every chance they get.

And once more, that's precisely the *modus operandi* of Peter Jackson in *Dead Alive*. Lionel endures humiliation (plus a lot of moisture) to win Paquita's heart at the end of the day. And the approach is exaggerated, serio-comic in the exact manner of The Three Stooges. *How* the humiliation of the lead character is vetted is critical too. In both cases, the directors rely on visual gut punches of a sort: lunging cameras, cockeyed angles, and loopy, distorted cartoon-like close-ups.

It's no wonder given such a wholesale appropriation of Raimi's style that Jackson's films have often been termed the "direct progeny" (Michael Atkinson, *Ghosts in the Machine: Speculating on the Dark Heart of Pop Cinema*, Limelight Editions, 1999, page 187) of the *Evil Dead* director's works.

So *Dead Alive* is a little like *Evil Dead* without the top-notch pacing or *Night of the Living Dead* without the social commentary. It's audacious and crazy to be certain, a capable special-effects freak show, but beyond the gore what's the real value? With no variation in pacing, *Dead Alive* just keeps going and going like the Energizer Bunny, and after a while, who cares? The approach is distancing

enough that you may admire the gags and the set-ups for gags, but the movie itself grows tiresome. It's gross to the max, but *Dead Alive* is never particularly scary.



Say Cheese! A victim (unidentified) gets cheeky in Peter Jackson's cult splatterfest, *Dead Alive* (1990).

Is the message in the moisture? Is the gory medium the message? Perhaps. But even a crazy, over-the-top cartoon like *Dead Alive* has to kowtow to some sense of bedrock reality. Audiences must believe, on some level that these events could occur. Here, you must imagine that monkey blood can revive the dead and that the dead can copulate and gestate babies of their own. And finally, that Lionel would be fool enough to take a zombie baby to a playground.

By useful point of comparison, ask yourself one question: what would Ash do? Are his responses in line with what we would expect in a horrific situation, or do his responses flout situational logic?

I don't object to lowbrow movies. I suppose I object to *how* a movie is lowbrow. Even a lowbrow movie should still entertain, still sweep us into the story and thrill us. *Dead Alive* is a cold, calculating exercise in gory technique, and that's about it. How many times is it funny when a person gets hit in the crotch? (Answer: on YouTube, about a million.)

Admire the movie's gory, grotesque, impressive special effects all you want. But, hell, is that all you got?

Def by Temptation * *

Critical Reception

"There are some familiar conventions, but Bond brings to *Def* depth and emotional detail generally absent from such films ... *Def* is not a masterwork, but it's definitely the work of a major director-in-progress."—Richard Harrington, "Def by Temptation," *The Washington Post*, June 5, 1990, page 1 of 1

" *Def by Temptation* works for several reasons, but mostly because it successfully manages to maintain the eeriness of a good horror flick (Cynthia Bond, especially when she speaks in the guttural tones of the succubus, sends chills up your spine), while at the same time deflating the genre's sense of seriousness (Dougy, for example, is worlds away from Stoker's solemn Van Helsing). Likely to be skipped over as just another B movie, *Def by Temptation* will appeal to both horror and comedy fans—particularly adults."—Randy Pittman, *Library Journal*, Volume 115, Issue 19, November 1, 1990, page 138

Cast and Crew

CAST: James Bond III (Joel); Kadeem Hardison ("K"); Bill Nunn (Dougy); Samuel L. Jackson (Minister Garth); Minnie Gentry (Grandma); Rony Clanton (Married Man); Steven Van Cleef (Jonathan); Guy Davis (Bartender #2); John Canada Terrell (Bartender #1); Cynthia Bond (Temptress); Freddy Jackson (Himself); Melba Moore (Madam Sonya); Michael Rivera (Gay Guy); Z. Wright (Young Joel).

CREW: Lloyd Kaufman and Michael Herz present a Troma Team Release; Orpheus Pictures presents a Bonded Filmworks Production, a James Bond III Motion Picture. *Production Designer:* David Carrington. *Film Editor:* Li-Shin Yu. *Film Score composed and conducted by:* Paul Laurence. *Special Make-up and Visual Effects Created by:* Rob Benevides. *Director of Photography:* Ernest Dickerson. *Executive Producers:* Charles Huggins, Kevin Harewood, Nelson George. *Co-Producer:* Kevin Simms, Jahna O. Moss. *Written, produced and directed by:* James Bond III. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

P.O.V.: "I like horror because it's so intertwined with spirituality—I believe very strongly in God so it's a natural arena."²— *Def by Temptation* director James Bond III discussing the spiritual nature of his horror film.

SYNOPSIS: A sexy succubus (Cynthia Bond) haunts a local bar in Manhattan, luring African American men with wanderlust back to her apartment where she murders them. Meanwhile, a dead pastor's (Jackson) righteous son, Joel (Bond III), visits his actor friend in Manhattan, K (Hardison). Before long, Joel is involved with the evil temptress, and K and an undercover Federal agent investigating the supernatural (Nunn) must battle the evil succubus to save Joel's soul.

COMMENTARY: Evincing a socially conservative, almost Biblical world view, James Bond III's low-budget horror movie gospel *Def by Temptation* is a deliberate morality play; one which—in the spirit of the black cinema of the early 1990s— turns a moralistic and even judgmental eye towards the negative social behavior of some men within the community.

Those tempted to view it through a feminist lens may also find some aspects of *Def by Temptation* decidedly misogynist since the demon takes the form of a gorgeous woman.

Def by Temptation involves a female angel of death leading to damnation a variety of sexually aroused African American men, sometimes more than one a night. Her first victim is a slick bartender who has (during the opening credits) directed a previous one-night stand to get an abortion. For the moral transgression of promiscuity, the succubus takes him to her bed and destroys him there.

An almost identical sequence follows soon after. A nerdy husband who has determined to stray from fidelity for the first time becomes the succubus's second victim after meeting her at the same bar. His name is Norman, and he believes his encounter with the sexy siren is "too good to be true." He's right. After she has her way with him, the siren sends the hapless offender home with the equivalent of a Scarlet "A" ... where Norman's wife will see his bloody scars and deformed body, made sickly and grotesque by the demon.

In just two sequences then, *Def by Temptation* has hammered home its not-too-subtle point about promiscuous men and their wayward behaviors: "fornication is a sin."

The movie next turns to Joel, a young divinity student whose father, preacher Samuel L. Jackson, told him (before his untimely death) that "blessed is the man that endureth temptation." Accordingly, once Joel has reached the city, Cynthia sets her supernatural sights entirely on destroying the boy's moral rectitude and spiritual purity. Joel finds avoiding the sins of the flesh incredibly difficult.

The Bible is rife with such temptations, and *Def by Temptation* knows that. Eve was tempted by the Serpent in the Garden of Eden and led Adam into ruin or at least out of Paradise. Bathsheba tempted King David and led him away from the true path. Samson was tempted by Delilah, and so on. In many of these situations, it is wicked and wily women who lead good, virtuous men down the path to damnation.

Given this fact, one might rightly make the claim that *Def by Temptation* is a true evangelical horror film, accurate in its details to the Bible, or, contrarily, that Bond's film simply reinforces the unfortunate and prejudiced view of the female as 'tempter' and ruiner of noble mankind. Why, Cynthia even manages to lead a gay man to his doom...

Promiscuous men and sexy women aren't the only ones facing criticism and damnation in Bond's horror opus, either. An effigy of Ronald Reagan is a supporting player in the drama and even plays an important part in one horror sequence involving K. The likable movie star is swallowed by a hungry television while the Reagan puppet laughs manically. Early on, K also tells Joel that black men in New York City "were victims of economies, environment and Reaganomics."

Though Rush Limbaugh will not receive this news happily, the movie suggests the same thing that many studies have: that black men "stray" from marriage out of a generalized sense of despair and uncertainty, that they feel devalued. Nobody did more to make the black community feel that way than President Reagan, who created the false myth of the "Welfare Queen" and ruthlessly propagated it even when he knew it was false. Again, to be clear: Reagan again and again told the story of the black woman who lived off the government welfare check and had a fleet of Cadillacs but there has never been the slightest empirical evidence of this creature. It's entirely appropriate, then, that the Reagan monster is seen in *Def by Temptation* sitting atop the television like a vulture, spreading a message that devours K (a

black man) and then spits him out into pieces.

The talented black cinematographer and director Ernest Dickerson shot *Def by Temptation* and the ultra-low budget film benefits from his skills. The production had few locations: a bar and a few apartment interiors, mainly, but Dickerson shoots each locale carefully and cleverly. The succubus's perch in the bar is lurid and heavy on cigarette smoke and neon lights. The scenes purportedly set in North Carolina (Joel's home) are more earthy and less seedy than the city sequences, and finally, the succubus's boudoir is white, misty and mysterious, filled with opaque barriers (curtains and tiled shower walls) that help to obscure her true nature from the damned.

There's a phrase "Death by Temptation" that *Def by Temptation* mirrors, but def is hip-hop lingo for "great" or "very good." So the title actually means something along the lines of better for the temptation, which fits very well with the narrative conceit that Joel is more worldly and better off for having faced evil at this particular crossroads. He's a better person for having met the temptation and defeated it.

One can easily detect that *Def by Temptation* has a lot on its mind. The screenplay incorporates moments of real wit and clarity, and Cynthia Bond is impressive as the evil demon. However, the film falters in a few key places. One such place is surely the lead performance by Bond himself. A talented director he may very well be, but he would have better cast a more emotive actor in such a key role. Joel's role is critical to the film's success, and he comes across as stoic, stilted and uncomfortable.

Another problem seems to be that a few key sequences come off as laughable rather than scary. In one major horror set piece, Joel is rescued at the last minute by the sudden appearance of his righteous grandma, and her appearance at just the right place at just the right moment invites snickers of derision. It's all well and good to have a point to your horror, but you also have to focus on making the horror believable and sincere. Finally, any sense of suspense or real terror in the film is woefully undercut by the presence of upbeat rap music during the murders. It is exactly the wrong note to strike during moments meant to evoke a timeless, immortal terror. It's a shame, because the camerawork and editing during the bartender's death scene are thoroughly impressive (a wide angle is employed to suggest the inescapable nature of the villain). But all the visual skill is vividly undercut by a pandering necessity to add music that might appeal to the target urban audience ... but which doesn't augment the narrative.

Def by Temptation was one of several horror titles in the 1990s

that featured great talent from the African American community (*The People Under the Stairs*, *Tales from the Hood*), and it's a movie that viewers will want to like for a number of reasons. For one thing, it boasts real heart and intelligence. For another, don't we always want to cheer for the underdog, for the low-budget effort that shows up the more expensive, more callow product of institutionalized Hollywood?

Sadly, as much as you may want to be on the movie's side, *Def by Temptation* doesn't overcome its low budget roots, or two-dimensional view of sexuality. Dialogue like "There's a fucking Devil Bitch after me, man!" only serves to camp up the efforts of a film that wants, more than anything, to convey an important message about the 1990s.

While you watch, you can almost feel the movie getting there, struggling to be more than shlock, but director Bond eventually caves to his own worst creative temptations: bad dialogue, bad acting and the aura of a static stage-play rather than a motion picture.

Demonia * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Brett Halsey (Professor Paul Evans); Mike Register (Liza Harris); Lino Salemme (Turi De Simone); Christina Englehardt (Susie); Pascual Druant (Kevin); Grady Thomas Clarkson (Sean); Ettore Comi (John); Carla Cassola (Lilla the Medium); Michael J. Aronin (Lt. Andi); Al Clever (Porter); Isabella Corradini (Nun); Paola Cozza (Pregnant Nun); Bruna Rossi (Nun); Paola Calati (Nun); Antonio Melillo (Robbie); Lucio Fulci (Inspector Carter).

CREW: An Ettore Spagnuolo Production, for Lantena Ediace and A.M. Trading International Roma, a Lucio Fulci Film. *Music:* Giovanni Cristiani. *Director of Photography:* Luigi Ciccarese. *Art Director and Costume Designer:* Massimo Bolongaro. *Special Effects Make-up:* Franco Gianni. *Film Editor:* Otello Colangelli. *Written by:* Pietro Ragnoli, Lucio Fulci. *Directed by:* Lucio Fulci. *MPAA Rating:* NR. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A woman named Liza (Register) joins lead archaeologist Professor Evans (Halsey) on a dig at a monastery in Sicily where the

locals are ready to "defend the site" to the death. A local librarian explains why: in 1486, a group of perverse, blood-lusting nuns were crucified in the monastery's crypt by angry villagers. Strangely, Liza has been experiencing dreams of that horrific event and feels drawn to the monastery. She discovers the nun's bodies after hammering open a wall in the crypt. Meanwhile, members of Professor Evan's expedition begin to die horrible deaths...

COMMENTARY: *Demonia* is another late-era Lucio Fulci horror movie (see: *Cat in the Brain*) that makes only a modicum of what reviews colloquially call "sense." Still, this tale of "violence, sin and blood," to quote the screenplay, is enhanced by a powerful sense of place thanks to location shooting, and more than that, Fulci's expressive, bizarro camera-work. Uniquely, *Demonia* also feels like a meditation about the sometimes negative power of human impulse and desire let loose.

The action begins in *Demonia* when a group of horny, possibly vampiric/possibly devil-worshipping nuns at a convent in Sicily of the year 1486 forsake their vows of chastity and begin to sate appetites both lustful and gross. They undergo athletic sexual intercourse with willing young men, and then, after the act, drain their lovers' blood into ceremonial bowls.

When one of the nuns gets pregnant, the nuns cavalierly toss the newborn infant into a fire. Never one to spare the audience a direct view of gore, Fulci provides a close-up of the baby's arm burning to a cinder inside the lapping flames.

Understandably upset, locals race to the convent, crucify the bad-acting nuns, and then board them inside the crypt for all eternity. Or at least till the present, when a team of archaeologists explore the crypt, finding evidence of the villagers' crime.

Meanwhile, the nuns return from the grave to exact revenge on the archaeologists and the descendants of the locals who crucified them. One man, a butcher, gets his tongue hammered into a table. The local librarian, who has revealed the town secrets to Liz, is mauled at tiresome length by puppets ... er ... cats, who scratch out one of her eyes. Late in the film, a man is literally ripped into two during the so-called infamous "wishbone" sequence.

One of the oddest and most picturesque kills in *Demonia* is a quick one, almost an afterthought, really. A naked nun with huge breasts materializes just long enough to shoot and kill a victim with a harpoon gun. Then she fades away.

Mission accomplished, I guess...

I can't vouch for how much sense any of this plotting makes, but I admire the gonzo way Fulci stages his set-pieces. When Liza uncovers the crypt where the nuns were crucified, for instance, Fulci's camera turns apoplectic. It zooms in, and the movie flash-cuts to the nuns suffering. It zooms out, and then the movie flashes on more pain and suffering. Then the camera zooms back in again, wildly. It's a perfect visual dramatization of hysteria and psychic pain made manifest. Very expressive.

The overall message seems to be that two wrongs don't make a right. The nuns were evil, yes, but didn't deserve, apparently, to be sealed up in the tomb and crucified. To judge is the province exclusively of the Divine.

Or, since the film ends with the nuns being burned in the crypt, maybe the movie's message is that if you're going to kill someone evil, make sure you do it right the first time. I can't be sure.

But I do know this. Even if the movie's plot is a scrambled egg, Fulci sure knows how to cook it.

***The Exorcist III* * * * .**

Critical Reception

"Perhaps there is a good movie trapped inside the clunky confines of *Exorcist III*, but it would take a difficult exorcism to get it out."—Jami Bernard, *New York Post*, August 18, 1990, page 14

"The film is also let down by dialogue which opens with some witty and literate exchanges and then settles into a standard mode, and by Blatty's failure to pare away his tangled narrative more rigorously."—Verina Glaessner, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, December 1990, page 352

"It's a rather somber confrontation between the cop and the savvy serial killer, one that predates *The Silence of the Lambs*. However, the tone is more unnerving in this film, for while Hannibal had only his wit, the Gemini has Satan backing him up, with the

tormented soul of Father Karras along for extra leverage."—Andrew Hershberger, *Cinescape*, " *The Exorcist III*," November 2001, page 25

"Here's a nominee for most unappreciated horror film in recent memory. The ending is terrible, but it's not the ending Blatty wanted, so I'll forgive it. Blatty as filmmaker, rather than writer, is what's most significant here. Some of the cinematography in this film ranks with the best in horror/suspense films ever made. The beautifully choreographed attack in a long corridor, ending in a very large pair of scissors chasing a nurse across the hallway, may be the best staged murder scene since *Psycho* in the shower. Blatty got great performances out of George C. Scott and Jason Miller, not to mention Brad Dourif. This film needs a director's cut more than any horror film in recent memory. As a director, Blatty showed a lot of talent (much more than we saw in *The Ninth Configuration*)— it's unfortunate we haven't seen more. As a follow-up to Friedkin's original, it may not please everyone, but it's apples and oranges—this is a very different kind of story. This is a gem for those willing to approach it with an open mind. John Carpenter was actually approached to make this film—much as this critic admires John Carpenter, thankfully, Carpenter turned it down."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"Forget *Heretic*— this was the true continuation of the events of the original film. Despite the continuity discrepancies, George C. Scott is superb in the role originated by the legendary Lee J. Cobb. There's also a surprising amount of dry humor to be found. Hitchcockian suspense abounds, particularly in a scene involving a possessed hospital orderly. And who could forget Brad Dourif 's movie-stealing sanitarium scene?—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: George C. Scott (Detective Bill Kinderman); Ed Flanders (Father Joseph Dyer); Brad Dourif (James Venamun/"Gemini"); Scott Wilson (Dr. Temple); Nancy Fisher (Nurse Allerton); Nicole Williamson (Father Morning); Jason Miller (Father Karras); Zohra Lampert (Mary Kinderman); Lee Richardson (University President); Don Gordon (Ryan); George DiCenzo (Stedman); Grand L. Bush (Sgt.

Atkins); Mary Jackson (Mrs. Clelia); Viveca Lindfors (Nurse X); Samuel L. Jackson (Dream Blind Man); Patrick Ewing (Angel of Death); Fabio (Dream Figure).

CREW: James G. Robinson and Joe Roth Present a Morgan Creek Production in association with Carter de-Haven, William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist III*. *Casting:* Sally Dennison, Julie Salzer, Lou DiGiaimo. *Music:* Barry DeVorzon. *Production Designer:* Leslie Dilley. *Director of Photography:* Gerry Fisher. *Based on the novel Legion by:* William Peter Blatty. *Executive Producer:* James G. Robinson, Joe Roth. *Produced by:* Carter De Haven. *Written for the screen and directed by:* William Peter Blatty. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 110 minutes.

INCANTATION: "I think the dead should shut up unless there's something to say."—Lt. Kinderman (George C. Scott) in *The Exorcist III*.

SYNOPSIS: Fifteen years to the day that both Father Damien Karras (Miller) and the Gemini Killer (Dourif) died, a fresh evil prowls the rainswept streets of Georgetown, murdering and decapitating innocent victims. Detective Kinderman (Scott) investigates the strange murders, and the clues all seem to lead back to the strange case of Regan McNeil and those brave souls who attempted to "exorcise" the demon within her back in 1975, particularly Father Karras. When Kinderman's friend, Father Dyer (Flanders), is hospitalized, Kinderman discovers that Karras did not die. In fact, he is in a mental ward and claims to be possessed by the evil spirit of James Venamun, the Gemini Killer.

COMMENTARY: William Peter Blatty's *Exorcist III*— based on his own novel, *Legion*— is occasionally long-winded, plodding and sedentary, yet infinitely superior in quality to both the previous *Exorcist* movie (*The Heretic* [1977] and the next one in line (*The Beginning* [2004])).



Lt. Kinderman (George C. Scott) finds that time is running out in William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist III* (1990).

Although this third franchise entry plainly can't match the documentary feel or visceral punch of Friedkin's one of-a-kind original from the 1970s, *Exorcist III* nonetheless stakes out its own creative terrain with a modicum of skill and even ekes out a small-scale victory. It's a very good film, if not a colossal, timeless one.

Deliberately eschewing flash and hipness, this modest sequel embodies the age-old cinema virtues of seriousness, good performances and spooky atmospherics. When considered together, the elements forge an overriding sense of doom and gloom, of an autumn fast approaching, of judgment day on the horizon.

Close-ups of flickering lights, a clock that stops suddenly, and disturbing Christian iconography may not sound like the ingredients of a successful 1990s horror film, and yet such touches contribute mightily to *Exorcist III*'s aesthetic gravitas, aptly voiced in the film's exhortation that "the whole world is a homicide victim."

Indeed, *Exorcist III* obsesses on an old, aged world, one cracking and tearing at the seams because, once more to quote the intelligent dialogue, "everything's relative" and there appears to be a worrisome numbing of the globe's "moral sense." As evidence for this assertion, we see the Devil (or at least his minions) seep effortlessly into the ruined bodies of the old and infirm at a grand, gothic Georgetown hospital.

The old people left there as wards of the state are so authentically "out of it" that they don't even realize they're out of their bodies, committing evil. Society at large has cast them out, but the Devil yet has a use for them.

In the original *Exorcist* (1973), the Devil attempted to possess the young and innocent, the living embodiments of tomorrow, but in *Exorcist III* demons lurk more easily and freely in those our society has cavalierly abandoned—the hopeless mental cases and the lonely senile. The film is about all our yesterdays because the hope for tomorrow seems long gone, lost to a world where atrocities are uncomfortably common.

Exorcist III features scenes of crusty old detective Kinderman (George C. Scott) discussing with Father Dyer (Ed Flanders) the specifics of God's universe: the nature of evil and the nature of life. These conversations aren't merely navelgazing, however. Instead, these moments represent the appropriate cynicism of two crusty old men who have not created the world they hoped to make in their youth. They cannot look forward to the future because of their advanced age, and so they dwell in the past of *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), and recollect, in ritualistic fashion, the tragic death of a friend they both loved, Father Karras (Jason Miller).

Kinderman virtually haunts the windswept Georgetown staircase where Karras died, and on the job he faces each new homicide case with the glum realization that it's one more nail in his coffin, *in all of our coffins*. His latest case is a racially-motivated series of decapitations, but with a religious angle, a sort of trifecta of perversion.

Deliberately evoking a millennial, fin-desiècle mood, *Exorcist III* seems literally exhausted at times. The protagonists are old, and the Devil possesses the old. The line of dialogue "It's very late" is repeated in the film twice, and as viewers, we can't help but countenance the notion that the world has seen it all, and that there's nothing new left on Earth but atrocity and more atrocity. Everybody here is dealing with ghosts: ghosts of the past, ghosts of friends, personal ghosts, even the "ghost" of the Gemini Killer.

Outside its autumnal visuals and leitmotifs, *Exorcist III* dramatizes its story in a distinctly 1990s fashion, landing briefly on the decade's racial strife (the murder victims are African American), obsessing on serial killers (here a variation on the real life Zodiac Killer) and filtering all the demonic events through the filter of the police procedural format. These aspects don't always fit together particularly well or keep the attention rigorously, especially when the

welcome presence of Jason Miller as Karras draws us back to our memories of the exquisite first film in the *Exorcist* cycle. You can't help but wonder why Kinderman doesn't find and question the McNeils here, since they were the last ones to see Karras alive the night of his death.

Blatty is no William Friedkin, and wisely he doesn't attempt to be. Rather than aping the cinema-vérité style of *The Exorcist*, Blatty is much more formal in presence. He demonstrates a real preference for long shots and long takes and a buttoned down camera. His style is impressive in that it steadfastly rewards patience.

In a lengthy, quiet sequence, for instance, his camera stands back at a considerable distance from a night nurse as she performs her routine rounds. People come and go from a visible help desk during this long take, but the punctuation is a kicker. The nurse exits a patient's room after we have been following her for some time and suddenly, without warning, something monstrous pursues her. It's a white-clad figure more angel of death than angel of mercy, and its sudden, jarring appearance in the middle of dull routine is electrifying.

In moments like these, Blatty could have easily gone for a jolt or a shock cut, but he doesn't cut into the master, and the result is that the audience is lulled expertly into complacency. When the strange, ivory figure intrudes into the frame, terror is palpable.

Other moments, including a terrific shot of an old woman crawling on the ceiling, also evoke the unnatural and the creepy. Only in the more overt scenes with bells-and-whistles, particularly the exorcism and the climactic tussle with a medical examiner's scissors, does the film's action threaten to tread over the top.

So much of *The Exorcist III* involves Kinderman and the Gemini Killer/Karras sitting face to face and discussing matters of cosmic import. The Demon inside Karras informs Kinderman that it is "not enough to be a spirit," a recognition that as corrupt as the world may be, as old as it may seem at times, life is still the only game in town. Kinderman fights for his life, and for his daughter's life, in the finale. And the Gemini Killer does the bidding of the Devil himself to get a little more life (and secure his reputation as a legendary serial killer). Demon and man alike ... they all want more of this mortal coil, no matter how old or corruptible it seems.

The best horror films are the ones that tell us something about ourselves, and *Exorcist III*— in spite of the unnecessary exorcism and some weird u-turns into the practice of de-sanguinating human bodies —succeeds in that task.

In the end, don't we all secretly expect we're going to be sitting down in a room, just like Kinderman, and making a case for ourselves with only the Devil or God as company? The world may be a dangerous place, but who among us is ready to kiss it goodbye?

***Fear* * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Ally Sheedy (Cayce Bridges); Lauren Hutton (Jessica Moreau); Michael O'Keefe (Jack Hays); Stan Shaw (Webber); Dina Merrill (Catherine Tarr); Pruitt Taylor Vince (Shadowman); Dean Goodman (William Tarr); Jonathan Prince (Colin Hart); Keone Young (Detective William Wu); John Agar (Leonard Scott Levy); Marta Du Bois (Inez Villanueva); Helen Brown (Agnes Reardon).

CREW: Vestron Pictures presents a Richard Kobritz, Rockne S. O'Bannon Production. *Casting:* Karen Rea. *Music:* Henry Mancini. *Film Editor:* Kent Beyda. *Production Designer:* Joseph Nemec III. *Director of Photography:* Robert Stevens. *Produced by:* Richard Kobritz. *Executive Producers:* Mitchell Cannold, Diane Nabatoff. *Written and directed by:* Rockne S. O'Bannon. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Best-selling author and psychic, Cayce Bridges (Sheedy) assists the local police on a new serial killer investigation. While looking into the acts of the brutal killer nicknamed "The Shadowman" (Vince), Cayce realizes that the murderer is a psychic, and more importantly, has a psychic able to "read" her. The serial killer becomes obsessed with Cayce, and threatens to kill her loved ones and friends unless she stops helping the police. A fireman neighbor, Jack (O'Keefe), helps Cayce realize she can't be a victim and fight back before the killer strikes again.

COMMENTARY: *Fear* is a seldom-seen but surprisingly well-crafted thriller in the serial-killer mold. Like *Hideaway* (1995), it involves a person who "sees what the killer sees," and offers the opposite in that

equation too: the killer sees what psychometrist and best-selling author Cayce Bridges sees. Not surprisingly, the twisted serial killer, played creepily by Pruitt Taylor Vince and dubbed "The Shadowman," enjoys having a captive audience for his fear-based crimes. He all but physically tortures Cayce, a very vulnerable, very engaged Ally Sheedy, during his reign of terror. More than that, he successfully isolates Cayce from her friends and even the police, threatening to kill someone innocent if she "tells" on him.

The Shadowman in *Fear* wears a ball cap so we almost never see his face, and all of Cayce's visions appear in a sort of misty, impenetrable blue light. What this comes down to is that the killer knows what Cayce looks like, but she only has a vague impression of his physical appearance. Director Rockne O'Bannon has some fun with this inequity. For instance, during a search for the killer, the Shadowman actually pulls up right behind Cayce's car, and we get two perspectives right after the other: the killer's, looking forward right at Cayce, and then an angle on Cayce, in her car with the killer in the background of the shot. "Peekaboo ... I see you...", he whispers.

O'Bannon pulls a number of moments like this, moments which both undercut and supplant one "safe" perspective with another "unsafe" one.

"Whatever you do, don't look to the right," says one character, and the camera suddenly pivots to a stranger standing in the distance, pushing in on him as though he is the killer. The moment is pulsequickenning and alarming, heightened by the impression that a killer could be close by, watching us.

More than a modicum of suspense is also generated during the extended sequence involving the Shadowman's pursuit of Cayce's literary agent, Jessica (Lauren Hutton). The Shadowman has learned from Cayce's mind that Jessica's greatest fear is suffocation, and so he uses that against her. He pursues her from LAX to a parking deck, and the climax is a swooning, high angle shot of the distraught, wrecked Cayce, at the airport, seeing the murder clearly in her mind but unable to stop it.

The final confrontation between Cayce and the Shadowman occurs in an amusement park, and the two literally duke it out atop a rotating Ferris wheel. The sequence may be predictable—the good gal wins in the end—but it is also spectacularly-staged. The stunts seem very convincing.

Even better than such technical aplomb, the film stays on track with its main conceit throughout. The killer encourages fear, scrawling "FEAR ME" at the scene of the crime, and thrives by making

Cayce feel afraid and isolated. But, as Jack, a friend, reminds Cayce, taking charge of your fear is the way to beat the bad guy.

The movie also voices the argument that our TV-obsessed culture makes targets of celebrities, something that certainly came to be a relevant issue in the 1990s, especially in light of the Monica Seles stabbing, or the Selena murder. Here, bestselling author Cayce goes on a tabloid TV show *Daybreak America* to hawk her best-selling truecrime books (which include titles like *Split Reflections* and *Murder Driven*).

Appearances like this, the movie seems to indicate, give the unhinged psychos and anonymous monsters out there more information than they need.

Enhanced considerably by Henry Mancini's spooky and unsettling score, *Fear* is a modest but thoroughly entertaining serial-killer flick. Bigger films have traded on the ideas it incorporates but not always as adeptly as *Fear* does.

LEGACY: Pruitt Taylor Vince went on to play one of *The X-Files*' most memorable and frightening serial killers in the fourth season episode entitled "Unruhe."

The First Power * .

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lou Diamond Philips (Detective Logan); Tracy Griffith (Tess Seaton); Jeff Kober (Patrick Channing); Mykei T. Williamson (Ollie Franklin); Elizabeth Arlen (Sister Marguerite); Dennis Lipscomb (Cmdr. Perkins); Carmen Argenziaro (Grimes); Julianna McCarthy (Grandmother); Nada Despotovich (Bag Lady); Bill Moseley (Bartender); Melanie Shatner (Shopgirl).

CREW: Nelson Entertainment presents an Interscope Communications Production. *Casting:* Mindy Marin. *Music:* Stewart Copeland. *Film Editor:* Michael Bloecher. *Production Designer:* Joseph T. Garrity. *Director of Photography:* Theo Van De Sand. *Executive Producers:* Ted Field, Robert W. Cort, Melinda Jason. *Produced by:* David Madden. *Written and directed by:* Robert Resnikoff. MPAA

Rating: R. Running time: 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: L.A.P.D. detective Russell Logan (Philips) hunts the Pentagram Killer with the help of an informant, a psychic, Tess (Seaton). The killer, Patrick Channing (Kober), is captured and executed, but the killings soon resume. As Russell and Tess learn, the killer is still around, no longer a man but a Satanic force.

COMMENTARY: The 1989 Wes Craven film *Shocker* appears to have kicked off a trend in the horror movies of the 1990s. That postmodern, satirical horror film featured a homicidal maniac, Horace Pinker (Mitch Pileggi), who, following his execution and death in the electric chair, went on to continue his killing spree. Pinker did so by hopping from human body to human body, making him difficult to recognize, let alone track. He was a serial killer unbound, even possessing the body of a cute little girl in one wicked scene, and the Craven film's bravura climax found Pinker unloosed in the "rubber reality" milieu of cable television signals and reruns.

Nineties films such as *The First Power* and *Fallen* (1998) depict essentially the same basic story as Craven's *Shocker*, with but a few variations on the theme. In both productions, a serial killer returns, post-death-penalty, to pick up his old game, confounding police in the process.

In both films, the source of the evil character's power is demonic, or Hell-based. However, while *Fallen* is serious and dark, clearly in the mold of the powerful *Se7en*, *The First Power* is simply cheesy. It plumbs the depths of police procedural clichés and attempts to generate frisson from its Millennial/Apocalyptic/Satanic undercurrents. On that latter front, the film is rife with pentagrams, discussions of sin (the killer was born of incest), Catholic symbols, and what the script terms "mumbo jumbo occult bullshit." "The First Power" itself refers to Satan's gift to a dedicated follower, Patrick Channing: resurrection. The second and third powers are, respectively, "knowing the future," and "entering another person's body."

In terms of the police procedural format, *The First Power* seems obligated to cover familiar territory. The movie offers a dedicated young cop as the lead protagonist, one who boasts a tragic incident in his past. Here, Detective Logan's father was murdered by a robber

while closing down his metropolitan bar. *The First Power* also imperils and kills Logan's only friend, his beloved and trusted partner, in a scene involving a trampling by horse.

The movie even provides what critic Roger Ebert terms "the wrong-headed" superior or police captain who always makes the wrong call. This character was so frequent in the 1990s that he should be banned from film forever.



A gruesome serial killer from beyond the grave was here. Lou Diamond Phillips confronts his bloody calling card in *The First Power* (1990).

The film likewise features baffling, "impossible" killings that defy logic and investigation (a facet also of 1990's *Exorcist III*), and even treads a bit into the tired, "You See into Me/I See into You" convention in which cop and serial killer are "connected," two sides of one coin (see: *Fear*).

As familiar, derivative and depressing as these laboriously-presented qualities certainly remain, *The First Power* fails most notably in its inconsistent, anything-goes depiction of the supernatural. Patrick Channing is a kind of nebulous, confusing threat. When he returns from death, he is apparently "Satan-powered" and able to jump ten stories in a single bound without even a flesh wound.

But Channing can also magically transmit his voice over the radio and appear in different bodies, including that of a bag lady and a police officer. He even utilizes a whirring (unplugged) ceiling fan as

a weapon of mass destruction in one sequence, thus proving he can power electrical devices.

Sometimes *The First Power* reveals Channing as "himself " (actor Jeff Kober), sometimes the audience seems him as a nun or another character. Sometimes he seems able to de-materialize other people and actually replace them. Sometimes we see Channing and realize he is present in the scene, while other times we see another character and only later realize who was really standing there. If handled cleverly, this might have been suspense-provoking, but *The First Power* lacks the discipline to really effectively trick the audience.

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Basically, there's no rhyme or reason to Channing's abilities, which means that Logan's defeat of the supernatural serial killer must come down to arbitrary trickiness too. In particular, Channing utilizes a mystical weapon, "the Knife of Christ." But still, to successfully use a knife you have to be able to identify your quarry.

A killer as powerful as is Channing—a fact aptly demonstrated by the movie itself—would likely never let such a thing occur. And indeed, that's the final, wicked, cold-hearted joke of *Fallen*. But this movie simply isn't that smart. I mean, if the second power is

knowledge of the future, why doesn't Channing know how to beat Logan? Why can't he see his own defeat and work around it?

A very young Lou Diamond Phillips stars as Lt. Logan here, but his performance is weak, focusing mainly on the removal of his shirt so he can show off his buff chest. Still, Phillips' performance looks worthy of George C. Scott compared to Tracy Griffith, who diffidently plays the annoying psychic, Tess Seaton. These performers simply don't have the chops to elevate the material above mediocrity.

Littered with genre conventions of the 1990s, from the *de rigueur* "stay awake" shot (a character waking up in bed, sweaty, after a nightmare) to the expected sting-in-the-tail/tale, in which a killer rises from the dead one more time, *The First Power* lacks even a modest sense of originality, let alone ingenuity.

The first order for *The First Power* should have been a rewrite of the first draft.

Flatliners * * * .

Critical Reception

"Apart from the silliness of its story, *Flatliners* is smartly enough directed (by Joel Schumacher) and delivers enough summer-blockbuster thrills to be a strong candidate for box-office success. Indeed, no other Hollywood movie of the season holds as many jolts and surprises; and those commodities sell well, especially well at this time of year."—David Sterritt, *Christian Science Monitor*, August 13, 1990, page 10

"The film creates its own spooky atmosphere through splendid visuals and sound effects, making the unreal seem somehow palpable and frightening while creating psychological dream states that are compellingly real. *Flatliners* is visually elegant and stylistically perfect, a surprisingly adult horror vehicle that both disturbs and lingers in the mind. The film is remarkable for its cinematography by

Jan De Bont ... its gothic production design, and its sound and film editing."—James M. Welsh, *Films in Review*, December 1990, page 559

"This absurd little tale, written by Hollywood neophyte Peter Filardi, has been given the most pretentious presentation imaginable—huge sets strive for the gothic feeling of some medieval medical school, monochromatic lighting with entire sequences shot in red or brown, overbearing direction by Joel Schumacher."—Mike McGrady, *Newsday*, August 10, 1990, part II, page 13

"At first glance, *Flatliners* appears to be simply a Brat Pack horror movie, with Hollywood's favorite 'lost boy' Kiefer Sutherland leading a group of camera-ready med students into the den of fear. Within the first few minutes, however, it becomes clear that the film is a more ambitious drama about metaphysical dread. All horror films are essentially about the mystery of death and while this film provides some very muddled theories about what waits for us beyond the grave, it remains genuinely intriguing throughout. Under the direction of stylist Joel Schumacher, the visuals radiate a kind of autumnal glow, enhancing the sense of loss that each of the characters feels. It's not nearly as intelligent as Ken Russell's comparable *Altered States*, but it nevertheless gets under the viewer's skin."—Joseph Maddrey, *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Film*

"By the 1990s interest in near-death experiences (NDE) had taken root in pop culture to the point where Hollywood could explore the phenomenon through the genres of thriller and horror. *Flatliners* provides an interesting journey into the possibility of life beyond death as a group of medical students take turns entering the realm of clinical death to see what lies beyond. This film includes three interesting facets. First, it does not address NDEs from the dominant interpretations of the time in terms of scientific skepticism or 'New Age' spiritual frameworks. Second, NDEs are used as a narrative device to discuss the significance and repercussions of our moral choices on *this* side of death's door. And third, although ostensibly addressing life after death, the film never really touches on the issue directly. One possible interpretation of the film is that the haunting earlier life flashbacks experienced during the NDEs by each of the medical students is the result of chemical processes in the brain. Although the experiences continue after resuscitation, with increasing mental anguish and even physical violence, it is possible that the experiences can still be interpreted as psychological rather than an afterlife intruding on this worldly realm. However interpreted,

Flatliners is an entertaining thriller that touches on the present implications for the last great journey that awaits us all."—John W. Morehead, *TheoFantastique*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kiefer Sutherland (Nelson); Julia Roberts (Rachel); William Baldwin (Joe Hurley); Oliver Platt (Steckles); Kevin Bacon (Dave Lobracchio); Kimberly Scott (Winnie Hicks); Joshua Ruddy (Billy Mahoney); Benjamin Mouton (Rachel's Father); Aeryk Egan (Young Nelson); Kesha Reed (Young Winnie).

CREW: Columbia Pictures Presents a Stonebridge Enterprises Picture, a Joel Schumacher film. *Casting:* Mali Finn. *Music:* James Newton Howard. *Film Editor:* Robert Brown. *Production Designer:* Eugenio Zanetti. *Director of Photography:* Jan De Bont. *Executive Producers:* Scott Rudin, Michael Rachmil, Peter Filardi. *Written by:* Peter Filardi. *Produced by:* Michael Douglas, Rick Bieber. *Directed by:* Joel Schumacher. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:*

INCANTATION: "Philosophy failed. Religion failed. Now it's up to the physical sciences. Man -kind deserves to know."—Nelson (Kiefer Sutherland) arrogantly encourages his fellow students to explore the boundaries of death in *Flatliners*.

SYNOPSIS: Five brilliant, young and self-confident medical school students embark on a dangerous experiment to chart the boundaries of death. Their headstrong and arrogant leader Nelson (Sutherland) is the first to attempt a flat line experiment, which involves stopping his heart and then an initiation of a Near Death Experience after all body functions have ceased. Nelson survives the experiment, but afterwards begins to experience vengeful, violent phantasms from his time "beyond" the boundaries of life. His cohorts in the experiment each take the same risk, and each face elements of judgment or morality that have returned with them from the precipice of death. For the womanizer, Hurley (Baldwin), he faces the accusatory looks of phantom women ... and the rejection of his fiancée. For the beautiful Rachel (Roberts), she discovers the truth about the untimely death of her father. And for the rebel, atheist Lobracchio (Bacon), he must

reckon with an old school-yard wrong that he's never addressed...

COMMENTARY: As death approaches, it is our morality that is on the line; not merely our mortality. At least that's the direct implication of Joel Schumacher's *Flatliners*, a stylish film that serves as a wake-up call for the nineties, and one that explicitly decries the "greed is good" mentality of the avaricious 1980s. In that decade of Reagan, morality happily gave way to venality, and many Americans believed they'd never have to pay the piper for misbehavior on the mortal coil.

In vetting this tale of morality in ascension, *Flatliners* emerges as perhaps the first post-Yuppie horror film of the new decade, and it dares to suggest that which was once taken for granted in American society: that our behavior on Earth boasts moral implications; both here and in the hereafter. There's no palliative happy talk in *Flatliners* about "trickle down" values or American Exceptionalism or the glories and mechanisms of free markets. There are no excuses at all, actually. Only the truth laid bare; that the hurts we deal out to others in the course of our lives will, in the end, often harm us too.

Flatliners is a film about the end of a political era (the 1980s). As such, it is set in a world of seemingly perpetual sunset; a reflection, perhaps of the *dramatis personae* and their incomplete, poorly-nurtured moralities. Much of the film boasts a remarkable autumnal look, rich in oranges and apricots; heavy in browns and earth tones. Leaves blow and fall in the foreground like rain, and one scene is set at a Halloween bonfire, the ultimate, perhaps in autumnal holidays, and a celebration, in part, of death itself. These images all reckon with an encroaching end; a coming cessation. Not simply death, but a realization that the party is finally, truly over.

Flatliners also seeks to impose a higher order, God's sense of morality, into its narrative proceedings, and does so by featuring several shots of building-sized graffiti: human faces glaring down upon characters, watching what they do and say. These shots of modern, street art serve essentially the same purpose as the myriad views of long-standing statues and reliefs painted on walls. That religious iconography is an indication of classical themes; of the presence of God in the affairs of mankind. As the characters tellingly report, they feel like they "are being watched."

Indeed they are: The eyes of the Almighty are upon them.

Much of the film's dialogue points to this moral epiphany about the universe. The characters begin to realize that, in their

unquestioning arrogance, they have forgotten that they don't control the mechanisms of Creation.



Back from the other side, Nelson (Kiefer Sutherland) receives succor from Rachel (Julia Roberts), but the terror is just beginning in *Flatliners* (1990).

"We're being paid back for our arrogance," says Steckler at one point. "Everything we do matters" worries Nelson, backtracking from his personal avarice and seeking to make amends for his crime.

Finally, even Lobraccio, the committed atheist, must cast his eyes heavenward, acknowledge the Divine, and seek forgiveness. "I'm sorry we stepped on your fucking territory," he shouts. "Isn't that enough?"

The answer to Lobraccio's interrogative is a resounding negative, and *Flatliners* spends much time dramatizing the young, physically

attractive main characters in a hedonistic, unflattering light. Hurley is an unrepentant "pussy marauder" who videotapes his lovers without their permission. Nelson is a bully at heart and always has been. In fact, he committed murder as a child.



The *Flatliners* class picture. Left to right: Julia Roberts, William Baldwin, Kiefer Sutherland, Oliver Platt and Kevin Bacon.

Even Lobbaccio—whose sin was lighter—is viewed as cruel and uncaring. He played a role in making a little girl feel "ugly" and now carries the psychic weight of that wrong—that teasing. In his case, his cruelty was the cruelty of an unthinking child. But again, actions have consequences on the immortal soul.

When *Flatliners* comes to vibrant, spectacular life, however, it is not just moralizing but depicting the first-person, P.O.V.-style phantasms of the *dramatis personae*. These beautiful sequences exist "beyond the boundaries of death," but involve decidedly (though still

spectacular) earthly beauty. The camera is our eye as we glide over picturesque trees, skim over ice-capped mountains and visit other amazing vistas. As opposed to the autumnal colors dominating the remainder of the film, these moments "beyond death's door" are vivid and natural, and run the gamut from snowy-white mountain crests to flowing, beautiful fields of green and beige.

These images are less baroque than those of Ken Russell's *Altered States* (1980), and an improvement upon the "ultimate trip" images of films such as Trumbull's *Brainstorm* (1983). Still, all three films share in common the quest to "discover" that which exists beyond death, or the limits of the human experience. Is it God? Non-existence? The abyss?

The villain of *Flatliners*, the bogeyman of the film, is Sin Personified. "We brought our sins back, physically," suggests Nelson. Little Billy Mahoney (Joshua Ruddy), the boy Nelson murdered as a child, returns from the grave to torment him. His scenes are cast by director Schumacher in a chilly, nearly arctic blue, an acknowledgment perhaps, of Nelson's spiritual emptiness or coldness. Uniquely, Billy still acts like a child (albeit a vicious one). At one point, he spits into Nelson's protesting mouth, a school-boy attack.

Rachel's father—who committed suicide—also appears to Rachel, but his phantasm or rubber-reality world is depicted in stark, lurid reds, in keeping with the forbidden and sleazy nature of his demise (which involved a heroin addiction).

Hurley's phantasm is perhaps the most interesting of the bunch, as it reveals much about his character (and his flaws). Specifically, Hurley's trip beyond death focuses on the feminine qualities of humanity. We witness, once more in first person, subjective shots, Hurley's exit from the womb as an infant, and the ensuing love and softness of the females in his life. As Hurley grew up, his apparent need for love from females became an obsession. And then that obsession turned into an addiction, and finally, exploitation.

When his "demons" come for Hurley, they come in the same form as his crime: as images on cameras, on television sets, and other "portals" of the mass media. And all the avengers are the wronged, the female.

Perhaps the biggest flaw in *Flatliners* is the repetitive somewhat contained structure, which requires Nelson, Hurley, Lobbaccio and Rachel to undergo the same medical procedure and then experiences phantasms like five minute music video clips. Schumacher uses every trick in the book to drum up interest in what is essentially a sedentary/motionless medical procedure, with spinning cameras,

plenty of running, and some overwrought dialogue, but occasionally there's an awareness of the fact that we're in the hands of the magician, of a manipulator who can't stop juggling.

The film's didactic, on-the-nose ending also seems a bit cheesy, as everybody learns their lesson in this moral universe and makes amends. It's a nice message, especially after years of yuppie films, but it's still hard to get away with a finale so achingly earnest.

Still, *Flatliners* is an involving, powerful horror film, beautifully photographed. If watched in conjunction with Adrian Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder* and even Blatty's world-weary *Exorcist III* one begins to gain a sense of awareness of where more 1990s horror movies could have taken audiences: to an excavation of the human spirit and human heart after a particularly reckless and avaricious span in our history.

***Frankenstein Unbound* * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: John Hurt (Dr. Buchanan); Raul Julia (Victor Frankenstein); Nick Brimble (The Monster); Bridget Fonda (Mary Shelley); Catherine Rabett (Elizabeth); Jason Patric (Byron); Michael Hutchence (Shelley); Catherine Corman (Justine); William Geiger (Lab Tech); Terri Treas (Voice of Computer).

CREW: 20th Century-Fox presents a Mount Company Production, a Roger Corman film. *Casting:* Caro Jones. *Film Editors:* Mary Bauer, Jay Cassidy. *Production Designer:* Enrico Tovaglieri. *Music:* Carl Davis. *Costume Designer:* Franca Zucchelli. *Special Effects:* Nick Dudman. *Director of Photography:* Armando Nannuzzi, Michael Scott. *Produced by:* Roger Corman, Kobi Jaeger, Thom Mount. *Based on the novel by:* Brian W. Aldiss. *Written by:* Roger Corman, F. Feeney. *Directed by:* Roger Corman. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Dr. Buchanan (Hurt), who has developed a particle beam weapon for the Pentagon, accidentally time slips (inside his talking car) from the year 2031 back to the era of Victor Frankenstein (Julia) and author Mary Shelley (Fonda). When Frankenstein won't destroy his own creation, the monster (Brimble), Buchanan intervenes, aware

that his creation, his particle beam weapon, is also a "Frankenstein monster" of sorts. In the end, Buchanan, the Monster and Victor's bride Elizabeth (Rabett) time-slip again, this time to a mysterious future, where a lonely citadel awaits...

COMMENTARY: For all its obvious good intentions, Roger Corman's *Frankenstein Unbound* plays uncomfortably like an installment of the old Irwin Allen TV series, *The Time Tunnel* (1966– 1967). A hero from the future labors in the past to maintain the flow of the time, using his knowledge of history to do so. And he constantly encounters famous people, historically-speaking. *Why, there's Mary Shelley!*

And look, here comes Victor Frankenstein, who apparently wasn't so fictional after all! Since our futuristic hero Buchanan (John Hurt) drives a computerized, sentient car one can't help but catch a whiff of Glen Larson's 1980s TV initiative *Knight Rider* in the film too. It's as though *Frankenstein Unbound* were actually a pilot for a TV series never produced, right down to the movie's non-ending of an ending, which seems to promise more adventures in the land that time forgot.

What appears most troubling about the film is that an evolved man of the 21st century, Buchanan, feels so compelled to kill the Frankenstein monster and agrees with a 19th century man's view that the creation of "ugly" life itself is an abomination. The monster is a living thing, made of flesh and blood, not necessarily an affront to God simply by dint of its origin. *Frankenstein Unbound* never gets around to making this point.



The Monster (Nick Brimble) and his bride (Catherine Rabbet) face an unknown future in Roger Corman's *Frankenstein Unbound* (1990).

Also troubling is that, hell-bent on destroying the Frankenstein monster (even in a world at the end of time where, let's face it, it can't do much harm to anyone), Buchanan ends up wrecking the control room of a future city. I would wager there are some residents somewhere who were depending on those blinking controls and monitors...

The core of *Frankenstein Unbound* is, of course, the comparison between two "brothers" in human folly: the futuristic Buchanan of 2031, who has created a terrible weapon which seems to have

corrupted time itself, and the much more modest, if original, Dr. Frankenstein, Victor (Raul Julia), who brought life to a corpse, or rather an assemblage of corpse parts. Yet again, the comparison isn't necessarily apt. Frankenstein has given life to a being, and that's entirely different from intentionally creating a weapon that can wipe out the sphere of human history. Frankenstein stumbled into his monstrosity with good intentions; there were no good intentions, besides defending his nation, in the creation of a laser weapon.

On the plus side, *Frankenstein Unbound* looks pretty good for a lowbudget movie of 1990 vintage. There are some startling matte-paintings, and the historical touches are competently handled. Also, *Frankenstein Unbound* does a credible job portraying the monster in a way that is faithful to Shelley's original literary work. Here, it speaks, going from pleading to threatening in a heartbeat.

Also, at the risk of offending some, the monster looks better in *Frankenstein Unbound* than in Branagh's 1994 venture of considerably higher budget and renown. This creature—for all his repellant characteristics—countenances a somewhat romantic or mythic quality about his appearance that De Nero's monster lacks. *Frankenstein Unbound* is also the first movie to suggest that Dr. Frankenstein would make the terrible mistake of transforming his lover, Elizabeth, into one of the Monster's kind ... a conceit ultimately adopted by Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*.

Given such positive qualities, it is surprising how two-dimensional some of the human characters are, or how unsympathetically the late Raul Julia portrays Dr. Frankenstein. "I am a scientist, I cannot sin," he declares with blood-curdling hubris. His dying words to Buchanan (directed at the monster) are simply "kill him." That doesn't seem to fit with the repentant Dr. Victor Frankenstein who meets a sea captain in the Arctic and who tells his tragic story out of a hope that his mistakes in pride will not be repeated by others.

In the 1990s, after the flood of slasher films from the 1980s, the horror genre sought respectability by returning to literature. This film harks back to Shelley and to Aldus's novel of 1973. But it still plays as flat on the screen save for the tantalizing view of the future that we are afforded only briefly, before the film ends. *Frankenstein Unbound* could stand some tighter binding.

"Half way into watching this film, you know you're watching a classic—it just had box office written all over it. Swayze carries this film nicely on his shoulders, juggling supernatural thriller, comedy, murder mystery, and romance all very naturally, with Whoopi Goldberg delivering one of her best performances. This film hearkens back to a finer age of Hollywood, when films like this were fairly common and are now seldom green lit since they straddle too many genres."—William Latham, author *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"Although it's known for being a sweet and touching romantic opus (which it is), there are also some very dark touches here. The scenes of shadowy demons dragging souls down to Hell are absolutely spine-chilling, and deliver some of the most harrowing villain come-uppances I've ever seen."—Brian Solomon, *Vault of Horror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Patrick Swayze (Sam Wheat); Demi Moore (Molly Jensen); Whoopi Goldberg (Oda Mae Brown); Tony Goldwyn (Carl Bruner); Rick Aviles (Willie Lopez); Susan Breslau (Susan); Martina DeGnan (Rose); Vincent Schiavelli (Subway Ghost).

CREW: Paramount Pictures presents a Howard W. Koch Production, a Jeremy Zucker Film. *CASTING:* Jane Jenkins, Janet Hirshenson. *MUSIC:* Maurice Jarre. *FILM EDITOR:* Walter Murch. *PRODUCTION DESIGNER:* Jane Murksy. *DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:* Adam Greenberg. *EXECUTIVE PRODUCER:* Steven Charles Jaffe. *WRITTEN BY:* Bruce Joel Rubin. *PRODUCED BY:* Lisa Weinstein. *DIRECTED BY:* Jerry Zucker. *MPAA RATING:* PG-13. *RUNNING TIME:* 126 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: New York City banker Sam Wheat (Swayze) and his girlfriend Molly Jensen (Moore) live a perfect yuppie lifestyle until Sam is gunned down by a man in an alley on the way home from the theater. Now, a ghostly Sam attempts to reconnect with Molly and learn why he was killed. He enlists the help of a spiritual advisor, Oda Mae (Goldberg), to contact Molly when he learns that his murderer is

after her now.

COMMENTARY: Arriving in theaters shortly after the end of the Reagan Era, *Ghost* is a horror movie about America's inevitable—but delayed—return to reality; about a national awakening from the corrosive yuppie values that so many people believed in and lived by in the Age of the Gipper. "People want so much to believe," the movie suggests, and *Ghost* re-establishes a world of Manichean reality where the good are rewarded, the evil punished. Deeds on Earth matter and will be judged in the afterlife.

Ghost involves a white—and white-collar—man with a stereotypically strong, American seeming name: Sam *Wheat* (think of wheat fields in the U.S.'s mid-west). Sam lives the perfect existence too. He works on Wall Street in a high-paying job and lives with a gorgeous artist girlfriend in a renovated loft of expansive proportions. As is typical of the time period, Sam expresses himself, even his love of his girlfriend, in business jargon, in work terms. "I just don't want the bubble to burst," he declares at one point, and, well, bankers know all about bubbles bursting, don't they?

But in the course of the film, Sam experiences a crash. He loses his money, his girlfriend, his apartment and his life itself because of one thing: *money*. His treacherous best friend Carl (Goldwyn) was involved in a money laundering conspiracy and Sam stood to find out about it, so he was offed without a look back. Now Carl wants to seize Sam's assets, meaning his lovely girlfriend.

What Sam desires, before departing the mortal coil, is to communicate with his girlfriend one last time. To do so, he must place his trust in some of those despised outsiders of the Reagan Era. First, there's the homeless, surly ghost haunting the New York Subway, played by Vincent Schiavelli. And remember, as Reagan suggested, those guys were "homeless by choice." The ghost finally teaches Sam how to navigate his way around the spectral universe.

And secondly, Sam must place his trust in one of Reagan's "entitled" minorities, an African American woman named Oda Mae. In other words, suddenly Sam is as disenfranchised as the homeless, as the poor ("I had a life, goddamn you!"), and he can't use his money or connections or job, or skin color to come to his rescue.

So what Sam learns in *Ghost* is not simply that "you take the love with you," a treacly New Age sentiment, but that love is a value above possession of a corner office and stock options. Upward mobility, he

learns, is not about more money, more power, or more material belongings, but about the ultimate disposition of his human soul. If he is bound for an afterlife, Sam recognizes, it isn't located on Wall Street.

It's odd, but this (brief) post-yuppie awakening had a real currency in 1990 horror films, as one can detect from both *Flatliners* and *Ghost*. Both films sought to re-establish a non-material moral center to the universe over the universe of yuppie material values. They seem to live George Bush, Sr.'s ideal of a "kinder, gentler" approach to life, one twinkling with "a thousand points of light."



You take the love with you. The stars of *Ghost* (1990), left to right: Demi Moore, Patrick Swayze and Whoopi Goldberg.

Flatliners is probably a better film overall, and certainly a better horror film, but the crowd-pleasing *Ghost* has its pleasures and terrors too. Specifically, a powerful image from the film involves the black-garbed, Grim Reaper-styled spirits that drag "evil" souls down to Hell from the middle ground of Earth. These fearsome things don't ask questions, don't hear pleas, and don't accept excuses. They simply arise out of the ground—ambulatory dark shadows—and take their prey.

Today one can look back at *Ghost* and deride the schmaltzy romance and some of the shticky, theatrical humor, but one can also see how the movie cleanses and massages the yuppie's tortured soul. Sam must take the stairway to Heaven at the end, but he does so with a better understanding of his fellow man, and also with a feeling that his "value" isn't just a total in a checkbook, but the accumulation of his loves *and* losses.

Certainly, there are lapses in logic to complain about in *Ghost*, such as the fact that ghosts don't fall through the floors of second story apartments yet can jump through walls willy-nilly, but such complaints feel like small potatoes against the backdrop of an emotional, supernatural morality play which re-affirms the idea that Yuppiesm as a movement has run out of steam.

Ghost was nominated for Best Picture in 1990, an accolade which indeed seems out-of proportion to its quality, but Whoopi Goldberg certainly earned that Oscar for Best Supporting Actress. In all her scenes, Goldberg gives *Ghost* a huge lift. She punctures the maudlin moments with her straightforward characterization of a charlatan, and she's also an essential part of that naughty, mostly unexamined moment near the climax during which Sam—a non-corporeal ghost—attempts to romance his lost love one more time, only in a black woman's body.

Again, that would-be subversive moment is a small indicator that the disenfranchised have more to offer than meets the eye than is generally acknowledged in the monolithic, yuppie 1980s.

***Graveyard Shift* * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: David Andrews (John Hall); Kelly Wolf (Jane Wisconsky); Stephen Macht (Mr. Warwick); Andrew Divoff (Danson); Vic Polizos (Brogan); Brad Dourif (Tucker Cleveland); Donna Margolis (Nardello); Jimmy Woodard (Carmichael); Jona -than Emerson (Jason Reed); Minor Rootes (Stevenson); Susan Lowden (Daisy May).

CREW: Paramount Pictures Presents a Larry Singer Production of a Ralph S. Singleton Film. *Casting:* Richard Pagano, Sharon Bialy. *Music:* Anthony Marnelli, Brian Banks. *Film Editors:* Jim Gross, Randy John Morgan. *Production Designer:* Gary Wissner. *Director of Photography:* Peter Stein. *Executive Producers:* Bonnie and Larry Sugar. *Based on the short story "Graveyard Shift" by:* Stephen King. *Screenplay by:* John Esposito. *Produced by:* William J. Dunn. *Produced and directed by:* Ralph S. Singleton. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A drifter named Hall (Andrews) takes a low-paying job at Bachman Textile Mill running a dangerous picking machine during the graveyard shift: 11: 00 P.M. to 7: 00 A.M. Hall is invited by the mill's tyrannical foreman, Warwick (Macht), to join a clean-up crew assigned to organize the mill's rat-infested basement. Along with a few other workers, including Kelly (Wisconsky), Hall begins the work, only to learn that the subterranean bowels of the mill are inhabited by a giant, carnivorous bat.

COMMENTARY: Between *Graveyard Shift* and *The Mangler* (1995), Stephen King sure had a lot to say about American capitalism, manufacturing and industry in the 1990s, the Age of NAFTA. Of those two films, *Graveyard Shift* remains the superior effort, a convincingly sweaty portrait of squalor and exploitation that seems to understand that the decline of America's manufacturing superiority was nigh, in large part because, unsupervised by laissez-faire policies, investors

had not re-invested in their companies. They merely let things go to rot.

After the wholesale dismantling and defanging of Labor during Reagan's eighties (remember, he fired and replaced striking air traffic controllers), the workers at Bachman Textile Mill find they have few rights and privileges left on the job in the 1990s. They are lorded over by Stephen Macht's corrupt and avaricious tyrant, Warwick (in a great B-movie performance). His female employees are expected to put out for him, and the men are expected to work holidays, toil in conditions OSHA would never approve of, and do it all on the promise of double pay.

The lower levels of the Mill are— *charitably*— Hell on Earth, infested with rats and covered with the cast-off remains of America's glory days: namely old 1960s furniture, rusting machinery, and forgotten manila files.

Via a story from Brad Dourif 's colorful exterminator, *Graveyard Shift* subtly intimates that the Vietnam Era (also the Nixon Era) represented the beginning of the end for America's industry and workers. VC rats in 'Nam got a taste for American soldiers overseas, and ate them, according to Dourif. Now, with policies created in that era continued through the Bush years, the rats in America are developing the same appetites here. The film equates the subterranean levels of the Mill with Death itself since the basement conveniently connects right to the local graveyard, thus eliminating the need for a middle man. Workers don't require a funeral home director ... they can go right from the job to their coffins.

In *Graveyard Shift*, "the company" under Warwick pollutes the river, evades regulation, breaks the law, and in a particularly notable scene, the boss climbs over the skeletons of his dead workers in an effort to reach the top of the heap. Visually, the film lingers on images of blood and sweat, the very things workers pour into their daily livelihoods. When the film ends, and Warwick is killed, a sign goes up saying "Under New Management" and that was the acknowledgement that some change had to come to America. Bill Clinton was ultimately the man hired for the job, but it was under his Administration that NAFTA and other anti-labor policies were enacted. The New Management was the Old Management.

Graveyard Shift is not particularly skilled in the way that it generates shrieks and howls, but it is commendably hardcore, excessively gory, and truly disgusting. With rats crawling everywhere, with frequent shots of rising temperature gauges and with close-ups of sweaty actors in foul conditions, the film generates a true and

horrifying sense of place. There's also a nifty third-act surprise in the disposition of the leading lady, and some dynamic performances, specifically from Macht and Dourif. An amusing bit of product placement (for Diet Pepsi) and a strong subtext about the exploitation of labor in America nudge this seemingly-lowbrow film into being more than the sum of its component parts. Like the workers in the basement, the movie works overtime, hoping to get a shiver out of its audience.



Have no fear, the exterminator is here. Tucker Cleveland (Brad Dourif) battles rats in a crypt in *Graveyard Shift* (1990).

***Gremlins 2: The New Batch* * * * ***

Critical Reception

"As it stands, the first half is peppered with good-natured satire aimed at the Donald Trump–Ted Turner school of millionaires; the second half—when the gremlins take over—is more inventive and explosive, but also disappointing when true ingenuity gives way to mere sound, fury, and cartoonish glory."—David Sterritt,

"By conventional standards, the film is somewhat of a mess, but its constant atmosphere of fun makes it rise above (or below) any such objections.... Though in concept a silly rip-off, *Gremlins 2* proves thoroughly enjoyable, with the simplemindedness of its action counterpointed by some very clever tangential satire."—Edmond Grant, *Films in Review*, October 1990, page 485

"A fun but inferior sequel to the seminal 1980s Joe Dante critter classic. The

scares are mostly forfeited in favor of more cartoonish scenarios and broadly drawn characters. Although some of the gremlin creature variations are quite imaginative, one misses the purity of the original film's malevolent tricksters."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Zach Galligan (Billy Peltzer); Phoebe Cates (Kate Beringer); John Glover (Daniel Clamp); Robert Prosky (Grandpa Fred); Robert Picardo (Forster); Christopher Lee (Dr. Catheter); Haviland Morris (Marla Bloodstone); Dick Miller (Murray Futterman); Jackie Joseph (Sheila Futterman); Gedde Watanabe (Katsuji); Keye Luke (Mr. Wing); Howie Mandel (Voice of Gizmo); Tony Randall (Voice of Brain Gremlin); Paul Bartel (Theatre Manager); Kenneth Tobey (Projectionist); Julia Sweeney (Lab Receptionist); John Astin (Janitor); Henry Gibson (Fired Employee); Leonard Maltin (Himself); Hulk Hogan (Himself); Dick Butkus (Himself); Bubba Smith (Himself)

CREW: An Amblin Entertainment Picture, a Michael Finnel Production. *CASTING:* Marion Dougherty, Glenn Daniels. *Co-Producer:* Rick Baker. *Music:* Jerry Goldsmith. *Film Editor:* Kent Beyda. *Production Designer:* James Spencer. *Director of Photography:* John Hora. *Executive Producers:* Steven Spielberg, Kathleen Kennedy, Frank Marshall. *Written by:* Charlie Haas. *Produced by:* Michael Finnel. *Directed by:* Joe Dante. *MPAA Rating:* PG. *Running time:* 102 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Billy Peltzer (Galligan) and his girlfriend, Katie (Cates)

face difficulty adjusting to life outside Kingston Falls. In New York City, they work at the technologically-advanced but de-humanizing Clamp Center, the world's first fully automated office building and home to the Clamp Cable News Network (CCN). After the death of Mr. Wing (Luke), the little mogwai Gizmo is taken to the Clamp Center by a scientist working at the Splice of Life genetic laboratories inside the building. Before long, Gizmo and Billy meet up again and face another outbreak of malevolent mogwai. This time, the gremlins are enhanced by Dr. Catheter's (Lee) genetic experiments.

COMMENTARY: One of the early shots in *Gremlins 2* involves a swooping, beautiful push towards contemporary Manhattan; the Big Apple. It's an impressive visual reminding us that we have left behind Kingston Falls, the Norman Rockwell-ish setting of the first *Gremlins* film in 1984, and found new targets for mayhem ... and satire.

With pinpoint precision and tongueplanted-firmly-in-cheek, director Joe Dante utilizes this unorthodox sequel to rib just about every aspect of American culture circa 1990. His humorous approach renders the film both an effective time capsule and a pointed commentary.

The first target of Dante's amusement and perhaps scorn is the billionaire-entrepreneur type who had ascended in the late 1980s thanks to the laissez-faire business policies of the Reagan Administration, and had come to dominate media attention in the 1990s. Thus *Gremlins 2* features a lead character named Daniel Clamp, quite plainly an amalgamation of two famous men of the era: CNN's creator, Ted Turner, and land tycoon Donald Trump.

Ted Turner (1938-) had founded the nation's first 24-hour news cable network and was a proponent of "colorization," the (expensive) process by which old black-and-white films would be updated and made palatable for modern TV-watching masses. Donald Trump (1946-)—"the Donald"—was the man behind Trump Towers in New York City, Trump Tower Resorts (casinos and hotels) and such best sellers as *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (1987) and *Trump: Surviving at the Top* (1990).

In *Gremlins 2*, Daniel Clamp (John Glover) is the self-absorbed dynamo behind Clamp Premiere Regency Trade Center, a high-tech sky-rise/headquarters and home of CCN: The Clamp Cable News Network. Clamp is the author of the bestselling *I Took Manhattan*, and his cable network airs *Casablanca*, "now in full color ... with a happier

ending," to quote the film. And when the Gremlins disaster occurs inside his building, Clamp even has a handy "end of the world" message to air on CCN, a funny reference to Turner's famous boast that his CNN "won't be signing off until the world ends."

These men aren't Dante's only targets, either. He comments on the fragmenting of television brought about by cable, which creates for the film "niche" networks like The Archery Channel, Microwaving with Marge, The Movie Police (starring Leonard Maltin), The Safety Channel and on and on. Clamp also puts a frozen yogurt Bar in his high-tech building, referencing the current popularity of TCBY (The Country's Best Yogurt) stores and the early 1990s health-craze demand for "all natural ingredients." Dante delves into pop-culture movie references too, commenting on 1989 blockbuster *Batman* with a Gremlinsponsored recreation of the movie's ubiquitous bat logo, on the *Wizard of Oz* ("I'm melting"), *The Marathon Man* ("is it safe?"), and even laments the fact that a sequel was made to ... *Gremlins*. Dante also incorporates a jibe about the 1990s hot-button issue of banning assault weapons.



Grandpa Fred (Robert Prosky) meets the Mogwai in *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* (1990).

Gremlins 2 likewise mocks business jargon, which had grown and multiplied in American culture by the 1990s like some sort of terrible

plague. Workers were no longer asked to come up with good ideas ... they had to "think outside the box." Workers were no longer charged with blending departments, but finding their "synergy." They no longer had to do better at their job; they had to "take it to the next level."

This kind of inhuman gobbledygook, this businesss peak, is mimicked and expanded upon with great success in Dante's film. The revolving doors at the Clamp Tower entrance remind workers to "have a powerful day!" Characters don't discuss career aspirations, they reflect on "situational long term outlook perspective" and "career opportunity advancement." Even ceiling lights are no longer just lights they are part of an "illumination system."

If one catalogues all of these pop culture jokes, a common thread grows detectable. What Dante laments in *Gremlins 2* is the coarsening of the American culture to the point that everything and everybody is a product, a vehicle for squeezing out a profit.

Everything is a business. In the 1990s, Republicans went berserk with this, the Gingrich-ization of politics. They wanted to run schools "like a business," government "like a business," and even energy utilities like a business. By the beginning of the next decade and the Enron scandal, plus the necessity of the No Child Left Behind Act, America saw exactly the up-shot of de-regulation, of running non-business entities as if they were just ... businesses: disaster.

"When art and business join forces," declares one character in *Gremlins 2*, "anything can happen." He means it as a net positive, but Dante means it sarcastically.



The cable series *Microwaving with Marge* (Kathleen Freeman) goes horribly wrong. From *Gremlins 2: The New Batch*.

Gremlins 2 is prophetic in understanding the pitfalls of this 1990s approach. Have you been a success in real-estate?

Write a book.

Direct a successful movie?

Sequelize it?!

Have a good idea for a restaurant?

Franchise it!

Yet in a culture where the all-mighty dollar is so important, qualities such as individuality and creativity—nay, artistry—lose their significance. Clamp's two-hundred-and-fifty million dollar building, a monstrosity of mechanization, voice-operated elevators, self-cleaning ash trays, surveillance cameras and "eye-pleasing, color-coordinated, authorized art," is not an environment fit for unique, individual human beings. It's a big fat, high-tech "work"-extruding beast. As Billy reminds Clamp at film's end, following the Gremlin take-over of his tower: "You made a place for things ... [and] *things came*."

The Gremlins, the very embodiment of Loki—of chaos and anarchy—arrive in Clamp Towers and very quickly prove ... bad for business. They get into the "natural" ingredients at the Yogurt Stand. They destroy Splice of Life, a genetic laboratory that is the very representation of profit put ahead of responsibility, and science run

amok. They foul the complicated phone system in the building, and in one wicked joke are consigned to a hell called "hold," where muzak seems to play for all eternity.

Gremlins 2 is a gag-a-minute delight, an all out monster show and creature feature that, despite the humor, still manages to occasionally scare ... especially in the sequence involving a genetically-engineered Gremlin spider of unusual size.

At approximately 67 minutes into *Gremlins 2*, the film itself melts, and Gremlins begin to make shadow figures (bunny rabbits, Abraham Lincoln, etc....) on a white screen. In the movie theater where this is occurring, Hulk Hogan stands up, infuriated, and stops the Gremlins. This is just one post-modern, self-reflexive moment in a film that revels in shattering the fourth wall.

Those looking for a "straight" narrative may be put off during the film's last half, as the film shifts from narrative reality to a string of increasingly silly skits. But those skits, many involving Tony Randall as a "Brain Gremlin" who has artificially-enhanced his intelligence, à la *Charly*, are such high-flying fun that it's almost impossible to protest. Ditto for the moment in which—in a flat-out mockery of a scene in *Gremlins*—Phoebe Cate's character one ups her Christmas revelation, discussing the horrors she associates with Lincoln's Birthday.

Gremlins 2 is the closest thing to a live-action cartoon you are likely to see, but all the mayhem, all the brilliant effects have purpose. The real movie monster is our craven consumer culture, and that monster is everywhere, infiltrating every walk of life. It's in our television ("an invention for fools," says Mr. Myagi), it's in our news, here presented by a man in a vampire suit, and it's in our most revered businessmen like Clamp, who still wants to merchandize Gizmo, even after all the anarchy.

Gremlins 2 is wicked good fun, and one sequel that not only differentiates itself from the original, but in some way, exceeds it. It's the perfect nineties horror movie because it is about the culture, but it is also, very deeply, all about itself.

LEGACY: Though there have been persistent rumors about *Gremlins 3*, perhaps to be filmed in 3-D, as of mid-2011, no official announcement has been made regarding the future of the franchise.

Grim Prairie Tales * * .

Cast and Crew

CAST: James Earl Jones (Morrison); Brad Dourif (Farley Deeds); William Atherton (Arthur); Lisa Eichhorn (Maureen); Marc McClure (Tommy); Scott Paulin (Martin); Will Hare (Lee); Michelle Joyner (Jenny); Wendy Cooke (Eva); Jennifer Burkin (Sarah); William M. Brennan (Bluey).

CREW: East-West Film Productions Presents a Richard Hahn Production, a Wayne Coe Film. *Casting:* Herbe Dufine. *Director of Photography:* Janusz Kaminsky. *Film Editor:* Earl Ghaffari. *Production Designer:* Anthony Zienut. *Music:* Steve Dancz. *Executive Producers:* Larry Haber, Rick Blumenthal. *Produced by:* Richard Hahn. *Written and directed by:* Wayne Coe. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A woolly stranger named Morrison (Jones) joins a married man, Farley Deeds (Dourif), at a campfire in the wide-open American West of the 19th century. Morrison offers to tell the city boy some stories to pass the time, beginning with a scary tale about a white man's fatal encounter with an Indian rite. The second story involves a former city boy (McClure) riding the Great Divide when he encounters a strange, apparently pregnant seductress named Jenny (Joyner). The third tale, recounted by Deeds, is a tale of a family who settled out West after the Civil War and became involved with murder. The final tale, told by Morrison, concerns a gunslinger haunted by an undying enemy believed defeated in a shoot-out on the street.

COMMENTARY: Little House on the Scary? Right down to its fun title, the anthology *Grim Prairie Tales* is a 1990s "genre blender," an up-to-date mix of two long-standing formats (the western and the horror film) in the hopes of synthesizing something new and popular from the ashes of the past.

With the Old West as its setting, the terrors unleashed by writer and director Wayne Coe in *Grim Prairie Tales* are all about the frontier, about the edge of "civilization" and the mysteries (like Native

American curses) that may lay beyond it. The wraparound story, featuring Brad Dourif and James Earl Jones, is lengthier than those featured in most anthology films, with the end result being that audiences actually come to care about these story-tellers as individuals rather than as mere vehicles to push the anthology to the next story.

Even more delightfully, the film's wraparound segments concern the art of storytelling and pitch an argument in favor of horror in terms of valuable storytelling. "Don't these stories mean something to you more than just entertainment?" Dourif's character asks. That's the heart of the issue: does horror serve a moral purpose, even on the edge of frontier where traditional "law" is often absent?

The individual stories support this theme, in one way or another but are still hit and miss. The first tale involves "sacred ground" and a white man breaking tribal custom in his search for wealth. As you might expect, this tale balances the idea of "of-the-earth" Indians against materialistic and venal westerners and concludes that the love of money is the root of all evil.

The second tale is better, and much stranger. On the "grassy hills of the Great Divide" a former city worker named Tommy encounters a beautiful woman who appears to be pregnant. Though married, Tommy makes love to this stranger, Jenny, by night and—during the act—is literally sucked up into her vagina, where he will presumably be devoured. Not totally human, perhaps, Jenny then takes the man's belongings and moves on, in search of the next traveler. Because Tommy is "inside her now," Jenny once more appears pregnant ... and therefore vulnerable and in need of help to the next unlucky traveler.

It's not every day that you see a man sucked up into a woman's vagina during sexual intercourse, and this story in *Grim Prairie Tales* goes right to the heart of male discomforts with female genitalia. In myth and psychology, it's called a fear of "the vagina dentata"—the vagina with teeth, so this is a variation of the male castration anxiety and a direct warning for married men not to play around.

Again, the frontier seems a perfect place for such a tale: anyone or anything can wander over from the next ridge for an encounter. But in order to survive this wild locale, we must hew to the laws of civilization we know, namely monogamy and fidelity.

The third story, about a family settling in the West but bringing violence and terror to the new frontier with them, at the express disillusionment of the family child (representing the next generation), seems a reminder that wherever we go, there we are. We can't escape the darkness within. We bring it with us and pollute the new land with it.

Grim Prairie Tales' fourth and final tale concerns a gun-slinging contest in a western town. One fighter thinks he's the best, but a pang of guilty conscience and a touch of the supernatural too manifest themselves in an enemy he just can't kill. Once more, there's a strongly didactic purpose to this tale. It's anti-violence in tenor, and suggests that the way of the West— *the way of the gunfighter*— is immoral since it propagates violence, especially violence outside the law.

Aside from the second, insane tale, *Grim Prairie Tales* is at its best, oddly, when it just focuses on two great actors, Dourif and Jones, around the campfire. Deeds and Morrison become friends, and while watching the film, you actually hope to see more of their relationship and adventures together.

That doesn't happen—this is an anthology after all—and *Grim Prairie Tales* simply remains an interesting oddity. Though set in the Old West, the horrific "scales of justice righted" stories it depicts still hold currency in 1990s America. The western frontier was settled long ago, but questions about monogamy, property rights, ethnic customs, and violence still linger. In that way, *Grim Prairie Tales* is as much about the present as the past.

The Guardian * * *

Critical Reception

"Played for sick laughs this could have been great stuff. Played straight—as it is here—we laugh at the events on the screen rather than with them."—Kenneth Hanke, *Films in Review*, August 9, 1990, page 431

"There is no shortage of expensively elaborated technique (the low-angle, baby's-eye-view shots achieve an eerily three dimensional effect), but this does little more than accentuate the scenario's impoverishment. Camilla's evil intent is necessarily signaled from the outset, but no compensatory suspense is engendered elsewhere."—Tim Pulleine, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, September 1990, page 262

The legendarily cantankerous William Friedkin once remarked, "I'd rather work with tree stumps than actors." In *The Guardian* he

works with both. Wish fulfillment? Karmic comeuppance? Only Friedkin knows for sure.—John Bowen, *Rue Morgue*

"It's hard to make tree-worshipping druids all that frightening—at least outside of *The Wicker Man*. This tepid 1990 affair tries valiantly to create a bona fide screen monster in Camilla, the not-quite-human babysitter, but fails in the end."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jenny Seagrove (Camilla); Dwier Brown (Phil Sterling); Carey Lowell (Kate); Brad Hall (Ned Runcie); Miguel Ferrer (Ralph Hess); Natalia Nogulich (Molly Sheridan); Pamela Brull (Gail Krassno); Gary Swanson (Allan Sheridan); Jack David Walker, Willy Parsons, Frank Noon (Punks); Theresa Randle (Arlene Russell); Xander Berkeley (Detective).

CREW: Universal/MCA presents a Joe Wirzan Production, a William Friedkin Film. *Castings:* Louis DiGiaimo. *Music:* Jack Hoes. *Co-Producers:* Todd Black, Mickey Borofsky, Dan Greenburg. *Film Editor:* Seth Flaum. *Production Designer:* Greg Fonseca. *Director of Photography:* John A. Alonzo. *Executive Producer:* David Salvin. *Based on The Nanny by:* Dan Greenburg. *Screenplay by:* Stephen Volk, Dan Greenburg, William Friedkin. *Produced by:* Joe Wizan. *Directed by:* William Friedkin. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young couple, the Sterlings (Brown, Lowell), relocates to a new, designer home in Los Angeles, and Kate quickly gets pregnant. After baby Jake is born, the couple hires a gorgeous nanny, Camilla (Seagrove), unaware that she is actually a powerful druid princess determined to sacrifice the boy's virgin soul to a menacing, old tree in the nearby woods.

COMMENTARY: The modern American family is invaded by a dangerous supernatural interloper in William Friedkin's *The Guardian*, the director's first full-fledged horror film since 1973's classic, *The Exorcist*.

Reviled on release, *The Guardian* is actually a much better film than its critical reputation indicates. In particular, the movie concerns the invogue 1990s critique of unrestrained urban sprawl and development, and the ensuing battle for territory between Technological Man and Mother Nature.

Specifically, the film's tree-worshipping druid, played by lovely Jenny Seagrove, is actually Nature's Scion, attempting to nourish nature and carve out space for Gaia in a modern, technological world that has seen Los Angeles's population swell from two to three million in just thirty years (from 1960 to 1990).



It's not nice to fool with Mother Nature: Camilla (Jenny Seagrove) communes with a druid tree in *The Guardian* (1990).

In any such pitched battle for land, something has to give, and in

The Guardian, it's the next generation of human children (representing tomorrow, or the future), who must be fed to nature and killed if it is to thrive and continue. In a world where we are out of balance with nature, where we are separated from the Earth, this theme still carries powerful resonance. Future generations are at risk, the movie suggests, if humans don't choose a sustainable lifestyle instead of one of infinite growth.

Given this conceit, Mother Nature's "guardian" Camilla is frequently associated in *The Guardian* with natural elements such as fauna and animals. One shocking and erotic image reveals nature (The Evil Tree) and Camilla intertwined in a brand of passionate romantic clutch. Another frightening sequence depicts wild coyotes protecting Camilla, acting as her personal bodyguards in case of danger. And when Camilla, nature's high priestess, is wounded, tree bark rather than epidermis fills over her injuries.

Even the film's final shot of an owl, a sentinel, watching the climactic, bloody events, seems to hint at the importance of the natural world in the proceedings of the Sterling family. This valedictory image harks specifically back to an earlier instant in the film, wherein Camilla gives the Sterling baby a gift of a stuffed animal owl. As man continues to breed and build out-of control, nature will strike back, the film suggests, and the owl—Mother Nature's "seer"—is paying attention.

Not coincidentally, perhaps, *The Guardian*'s climactic battle royale even includes an example of wanton deforestation. The beleaguered father, Mr. Sterling, cuts down the ancient tree with a chainsaw, and torrents of blood flow out from the outcropping. It looks like human blood, a fact which again suggests that man and nature should live in symbiotic balance, or both will perish.



A blood-soaked Camilla (Jenny Seagrove) readies for the final battle in *The Guardian*.

The most frequently-lodged criticism of Friedkin's *The Guardian* involves the apparent proximity of the malevolent old tree to the Sterling house. The Evil Tree seems to be right in the family's backyard. But the question raised here by Friedkin and his film is not why an old tree stands within spitting distance of a neighborhood, but why man has extended his suburban sprawl so deep into nature that ancient trees are now imperiled by civilization's growth.

What at first seems a silly idea (an evil old tree just a stone's throw from modernity) is actually the very reverse: modernity encroaching on the ancient, the natural, the virgin. Accordingly, Friedkin fills his film with shots of civilization and natural greenery intermixed, visually buttressing this theme. Just take a gander at the Sterlings' bedroom: across the window frame, plants surround the glass portal. There were few critics who actually picked up on this leitmotif of the human and natural world in conflict, and therefore they missed the movie's careful and deliberate subtext.

The Guardian is also one of several 1990s horror films (Wes Craven's *New Nightmare* [1994], *The Blair Witch Project* [1999]) that alludes to the fairy tale *Hansel & Gretel*. Here, the story appears both in the prologue (involving Camilla's earlier family) and later in the

film, with the Sterlings. Specifically, children read a pop-up book of the tale, one replete with a giant avatar of "The Tree" on its fold-out pages.

Hansel & Gretel is the story of children lost in the woods, and many social critics in the 1990s would make a metaphorical comparison to the youth culture of the 1990s, feeling that it too had lost its way, what with the school shootings, the popularity of violent video games and the advent of possibly dangerous new technologies, such as the Internet.

In *The Guardian*, Camilla seems to utilize the fairy tale as a kind of religious primer to prepare the children for their entrance into "The Sacred Forest" and ultimate sacrifice there. It will not be a witch that eats them, but Mother Nature which devours.

Like *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, *The Guardian* also deals in the trenchant 1990s idea of Motherhood Outsourced. And yes, that's a euphemism, in some way, for abandonment. By the mid-1990s, more women and moms had entered the workplace than ever before in American history, and more than 800,000 private "household" workers came into the American home to fill the gap. More than a quarter of that number was involved in child care.³

This number represents a beachhead of "strangers" in close orbit of the American family, and the 1990s featured a number of celebrity nannies, from Fran Drescher on the TV sitcom *The Nanny* (1993-1999) to Louise Woodward, the au pair who famously was responsible for the death of her young ward, Matthew Eappen, in 1997.

What concerned horror movies, however, was the displacement of the mother by the new child care-giver, the new "guardian." These interloper women in both films not only raise the kids, they catch the roving eyes of the family patriarchs, at least briefly.

In *The Guardian*, Mr. Sterling catches a glimpse of his comely employee in the bathtub, naked, and the movie establishes instantly his sexual desire for her. What makes the scene creepier, perhaps, is that she is playing with his child at the time. Dad thus sees— *in one furtive glimpse*— a serviceable and preferable replacement for Mom, who has become harried at home, and overburdened with professional responsibilities on the job. Camilla can raise the kids and still look smoking hot.

Friedkin's movie centers "on what may be the most intense and threatening kind of betrayal imaginable: a mother who has abandoned her totally trusting child physically to a surrogate who also abandons him spiritually to evil forces."⁴ This is true, of course, but Daddy Sterling violates the same compact. Dads are equally responsible for

parenting as Moms are. More to the point, Sterling's ogling of Camilla seems to suggest a mental violation of another primal family relationship, the spousal one. Yet still, the film involves motherhood most specifically, noting the difficulty of opposing pulls (career or family) on women in the nineties.

The Guardian ends with Friedkin's trademark intensity: a balls-to-the-wall, bloody battle between Nature and Man. Man proves victorious in this instance, but the final shot, of that everwatching owl, reminds us that Mother Nature's eyes remain upon us. No, this isn't the existential, spiritual terror of *The Exorcist*, but Friedkin's film is scary, grueling, and sexy. It speaks to the nineties context in the same skilled fashion that *The Exorcist* did the 1970s, even if some critics think that Friedkin was going out on a limb.

***Hardware* * * .**

Critical Reception

"Notwithstanding its pretentious biblical overtones and cautionary 'messages' about environmental and population control, *Hardware* is really just an excuse for more blood'n'guts being splattered on the screen with two particularly gruesome scenes of violence towards the end.... All in all it's quite an annoying film."—Chris Hicks, *Deseret News*, September 21, 1990

"*Hardware* is a film made by, and for, a post-punk generation that grew up reading comics, listening to heavy metal music and goofing off. It wears its subcultural references on its sleeve, which makes it hugely enjoyable and a damn sight more 'in touch' than a movie like *Batman* could ever be."—Suzanne Moore, *New Statesman and Society*, October 5, 1990, page 30

"What *Hardware* proves above all, with its sheer style and energy, is that lack of money is not always a barrier to innovative filmmaking, and that resourcefulness and determination can go a long way...."—I.Q. Hunter, *British Science Fiction Cinema*, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 1999, page 178

"While this film was clearly inspired by *The Terminator* you also

wonder if the story 'Prey' from *Trilogy of Terror* might have played a hand. While not a great film, it shows certain ingenuity in handling high concept ideas on a low budget, framed very much by its budgetary parameters. It is, at least, a good film."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Dylan McDermott (Mo); Stacey Travis (Jill); John Lynch (Shades); William Hootkins (Lincoln); Iggy Pop (Angry Bob); Carl McCoy (Nomad).

CREW: A Wicked Films Production. *Special Make-up and Robotics created by:* Image Animation. *Special Effects Coordinator:* Brian Jeffrey. *Production Design:* Joseph Bennett. *Film Editor:* Derek Trigg. *Music:* Simon Boswell. *Director of Photography:* Steven Chivers. *Co-Executive Producers:* Bob and Harvey Weinstein. *Executive Producers:* Nik Powell, Stephen Woolley, Trix Worrell. *Produced by:* Paul Trybits, Joanne Sellar. *Written and Directed by:* Richard Stanley. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In a post apocalyptic future, a furloughed soldier named Mo (McDermott) purchases some desert scrap metal from a nomad (McCoy) and brings it back to civilization as a Christmas gift for his artist/welder girlfriend, Jill (Travis). The scrap turns out to be the pieces of a deadly government killing machine, the robotic M.A.R.K. 13 (code-named BAAL7697). Soon, the machine has begun to reconstruct itself, plugging itself into the apartment's electricity grid and seeking to murder Jill. Mo and his drug-addicted buddy, Shades (Lynch), return to save Jill from the robot, but they are beaten to the punch by a sleazy, voyeuristic neighbor (Hootkins).

COMMENTARY: Richard Stanley's directorial debut, *Hardware*, isn't an easy film to enjoy even if, on retrospect, you may learn to admire it. Unremittingly dark in both the visual and thematic senses, *Hardware* is populated by disgusting, repulsive and sadistic characters like the fat, drooling, foot-fetishist Lincoln Weinberg, or the obese trader. At times, *Hardware* also feels achingly pretentious, lumbering under the psychic weight of its own high aspirations. Still, the low-budget, claustrophobic movie inventively serves as a comment on the way big government abuses the trust of the citizenry and how that said citizenry responds to that breach; either by "tuning out" via recreational drugs as we see in the case of Shades, or creating reactionary art forms, as Jill's work reveals.

Hardware is cramped, dank, sarcastic and cynical and despite these traits, you absolutely can't take your eyes off it. "This place is going to Hell," one character laments and indeed, he's right. Stanley has skillfully fashioned a fascist cyberpunk nightmare world here, one where machines are the smart, resourceful beings, and humans are little more than hedonistic animals living in junky technological pens, getting by day-to-day with the company of insipid television, where music videos and angry talk radio play endlessly.

On the latter front, *Hardware's* speculation was sort of correct. In the 1990s, it was not the film's "Angry Bob" who would dominate the airwaves and angrily spout anti-government rhetoric, but drug abuser Rush Limbaugh, whose followers were seriously called—believe it or not—"dittoheads" because of their mindless, robotic recitation of his extreme talking points. In offices, cars and homes around the country, Limbaugh's angry, parochial, incendiary musings became the constant background noise of a divided nation.

We may not live in a radioactive wasteland today, but Stanley accurately predicted the toxicity of American culture going into the 21st century, even before Pat Buchanan attached the term "culture war" to it.

In *Hardware*, people are alienated from one another, and when not having sex they seem downright mean and depraved. Cyberpunk has been defined as the joining of "high tech" with the "low life" in an environment of dystopia, and *Hardware* mixes that equation just right. The apartment building is a technological hellhole, and its residents have retreated into purgatories of psychological addictions: gambling, doping, and planning sex crimes. Lincoln sincerely and brazenly tells Jill he wants to fuck her up the ass, and makes jokes about her "Hershey highway," an interest that suggests he has something in common with Mark-13. Specifically, he's interested in using "parts" for self-satisfaction without much thought for who owns those parts, or what purpose they may be serving before recruitment to his agenda.

Bathed in near-constant atmospherics (smoke, strobes, lurid red light, even Mark-13 digital "vision"), the film vividly depicts the ugliness and alienation of these individual cages. This hothouse world and our vision of it appear fragmented, and it's difficult to see the complete picture through the haze. But then again, you aren't sure that you really want a closer look at the details anyway...

A deep uncertainty about the future underscores *Hardware*, and it is expressed mostly through discussions and images of reproduction. Jill and Mo share a cleansing shower in one of the film's few adequately illuminated scenes, and then have sexual intercourse.

Afterwards, they argue about the morality of bringing children into this world. In such a horrifying post-apocalyptic environment is it appropriate to "live on through our children" or is it "stupid, sadistic and suicidal to have children" at this juncture in human history?

This human capacity to see shades of grey differs with the approach of the machine, the Mark-13. It doesn't debate concepts like "survival of the fittest," it merely goes on and on acquiring new parts till the end of time, thus ensuring its own longevity and immortality. At one point, the machine goes on the attack with a phallic-drill, an indication, perhaps, that Mark 13 has indeed become the dominant life form in this domain, the biggest dick on the block.

Among conservatives in the 1980s, there was some talk about "winnable" nuclear war, and *Hardware* takes that idea to its logical conclusion: a world where America has used the bomb and in which the country is an irradiated wasteland. In light of such an emergency, the government has seized more power and become a fascist, right-wing state. The state's "final solution" for its citizenry is the evil Mark-13 Project: a project decorated with a serial number equating it to an evil deity, BAAL7697. Accordingly, Jill paints the Mark-13's skull with an American flag, indicating it represents the government that has allowed all this to happen.

One of *Hardware's* final shots involves Jill hiding inside a refrigerator, using technology to battle technology. A few moments later, she batters the Mark-13 in the shower with a baseball bat. The scene is edited utilizing slow-motion photography, which makes it more than a battle for survival but rather an explicit and violent rejection of this apocalyptic future and the machine creations it has spawned. You gotta take a club to the bloody thing.

All this is interesting, thought-provoking material, and yet *Hardware* is plodding, oddball, unpleasant and ugly. Good horror movies have absolutely no obligation to be pretty or uplifting, however. *Hardware's* main deficit is not the darkness of the world it portrays, but rather the occasional incoherence with which it portrays it.

After all, "dark" is a metaphorical term. It isn't supposed to mean that you can't tell what the hell's happening in the frame, or to whom it is happening.

*The Haunting of Morella **

CAST: David McCallum (Gideon); Nicole Eggert (Morella/Lenore); Christopher Halsted (Guy); Lana Clarkson (Coel); Maria Ford (Diane); Jona -than Farwell (Dr. Gault); John O'Leary (Quintis); Brewster Gould (Miles); Gail Harris (Ilsa); Clement von Franckenstein (Judge Brock); R.J. Robertson (the Reverend Ward); Deborah Dutch (Serving Girl).

CREW: *Production Designer:* Gary Randall. *Director of Photography:* Zoran Hochstratter. *Film Editor:* Diane Fingado. *Music:* Fredric Ensign Teetsal. *Written by:* R.J. Robertson. *Associate Producers:* Alida Camp, Rodman Flender. *Produced by:* Roger Corman. *Directed by:* Jim Wynorski. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the 1830s, a witch named Morella (Eggert) is sentenced to death and executed, but not before she swears to her husband Gideon (McCallum) that she will live on through their infant daughter, Lenore. Seventeen years later, Lenore (Eggert) is about to become an adult and come into her inheritance, unaware that said "inheritance" includes spiritual possession by the soul of her dead mother. Forces in the household, led by the comely governess, Coel Devereaux (Clarkson), hope to encourage Lenore's terrible fate, even as they seek to physically revive the corpse of Morella as well. Meanwhile, Lenore's only hope may be a lawyer who has fallen in love with her (Halsted).

COMMENTARY: Tits and lightning.

That's what Roger Corman's low-brow *The Haunting of Morella* is really all about. Although ostensibly based on the 1835 short story *Morella* by literary genius Edgar Allan Poe, this 1991 movie exhibits the atmosphere and taste not of 19th century gothic literature, but of late 20th century, cable-TV soft porn.

Not that there's anything wrong with that.

There are so many breasts on display here it's actually difficult to pay attention to the plot. In one five minute span of *The Haunting of Morella*, we see three different topless actresses in three different scenes. Later, Clarkson and Ford share a lesbian kiss, then a lesbian skinny dip under a waterfall—topless again, of course. Then there's an incredibly hot sex scene between Eggert and Halsted, set amidst the pounding, throbbing rain. And on and on it goes, lascivious and lusty...

Even the look of *The Haunting of Morella* supports the film's heavy accent on soft core sex and this lingering attention to female anatomy.

The very image itself looks gauzy, as though the camera lens has been smeared with KY jelly as a visual act of foreplay. Thus the real loser here is David McCallum's Gideon, a blind man who is unable to see all the various and sundry breasts bouncing all around him.

Poor guy.

And the lightning? In another odd tic—and one significantly less picturesque than the obsessive focus on breasts— *The Haunting of Morella* often cuts to stock footage of lightning strikes in an angry sky. You can tell the storm visuals are stock footage culled from another production because the grain is wrong and the images don't look appropriately smeared with KY Jelly. But every few minutes—with or without reason—the film cuts to another stock footage lightning strike. In fact, an intrepid soul could invent a great drinking game for *The Haunting of Morella* based on the number of times actresses disrobe and lightning bolts arc through the sky.

In case you couldn't tell from this review, *The Haunting of Morella* is an unintentionally funny film filled with bad acting, bad writing and ridiculous scenarios. Occasionally, the film remembers that it is actually about something interesting: the sexual awakening of an adolescent girl, but most of the time it is content just to move quickly to the next gratuitous topless scene.

Many moments in the film are poorly staged, including an outrageous "cat jump" moment in which a poor feline is tossed onto a passing Eggert from a stage-hand on a ladder. The cat actually enters the frame at shoulder level, in a corridor without any high perches or ledges whatsoever. Where did it come from? A ceiling beam?

Still, this cat jump scene really stands out in *The Haunting of Morella*.

For once we're thinking about a pussy instead of breasts.

***Jacob's Ladder* * * * 1/2**

Critical Reception

"Lyne says he sees the movie as psychological rather than theological. Well, thank goodness. By whatever predilection, by the time you come to the end of this very visceral ride ... you'll probably feel either mildly or royally cheated."—Georgia Brown, *Village Voice*, November 6, 1990

"... director Adrian Lyne has encapsulated the clichés of three decades in a single dreadful and hysterical movie. This may be of interest to film students, who can learn from *Jacob's Ladder* everything they need to know about how not to make a movie. But ordinary audiences are advised to pass."—Richard Corliss, *Time*, November 12, 1990, page 104

"Lyne's use of meaningless music video directing style takes the viewer on a roller coaster ride through Rubin's shallow story about a philosophy Ph.D. cum postal worker cum Vietnam soldier wounded in battle. The viewer is teased to distraction by an endless supply of silly visual tricks, confusing flashes forward and back (we don't find out which until the end) and gratuitous special effects. Myriad times the viewer is brought to the edge of what appears to be plot, only to see the mirage vanish before his tired eyes like a thirsty desert traveler. The viewer is denied anything in the way of sustenance. It is the very essence of style over substance."—Toni Kamins, *Cineaste*, Volume 18, Issue #2, 1991, page 64

"Though it initially seems like a simple 'rubber reality' film in the tradition of *Phantasm* or *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Jacob's Ladder* becomes profoundly meaningful as it progresses, echoing the teachings of mystics Dante Alighieri and Meister Eckhart. One scene calls to mind the Tibetan Book of the Dead's 'Great Liberation by Hearing,' which ruminates on an intermediate state of reality between life and death, in which one must overcome emotional attachments to the mortal world before being reborn. Jacob's struggle toward this kind of rebirth seems to be the main thrust of the film, but even that is open to interpretation. What makes *Jacob's Ladder* so powerful is the fact that, in the end, it doesn't offer any easy answers; it doesn't espouse any particular religion or philosophy on life. Instead, it elicits overwhelming feelings of fear and awe from the individual viewer, prompting us to meet the film halfway with our own thoughts and explanations about the unknown."—Joseph Maddrey, *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*

"A psychedelic nightmare of a film, delivering mind-blowing twists and turns from beginning to end. Danny Aiello is excellent—and often overlooked—as the one source of calm and warmth in a film that literally assaults your very psyche. Its deeply off-putting 'head-shaking' effect has been copied countless times, including recently in the *Saw* series."—Brian Solomon,

Cast and Crew

CAST: Tim Robbins (Dr. Jacob Singer); Elizabeth Pena (Jezebel); Matt Craven (Michael Newman); Pruitt Taylor Vince (Paul); Jason Alexander (Geary); Patricia Kalember (Sarah); Danny Aiello (Louis); Ving Rhames (George); Brian Tarantina (Doug); Anthony Alessandro (Red); MacCauley Culkin (Gabe).

CREW: Tri Star Pictures, Carolco, Mario Kassar and Andrew Vajna present an Adrian Lyne film. *Casting:* Risa Bramon, Billy Hopkins. *Associate Producer:* Bruce Joel Rubin. *Music:* Maurice Jarre. *Film Editor:* Tom Rolf. *Production Design:* Brian Morris. *Director of Photography:* Jeffrey Kimball. *Executive Producers:* Mario Kassar, Andrew Vajna. *Written by:* Bruce Joel Rubin. *Produced by:* Alan Marshall. *Directed by:* Adrian Lyne. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 118 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An easy-going and likeable American soldier and doctor of philosophy, Jacob Singer (Robbins), is wounded in Vietnam during a battle. Upon his apparent return to the States after the war, Jacob begins to see strange people with the characteristics of Biblical demons. Separated from his wife, Sarah (Kalember) and still in mourning over the death of his son, Gabe (Culkin), Jacob tells his girlfriend, Jezebel (Pena) about these visions, but she thinks he's going mad. Then, Jacob is contacted by members of his unit in 'Nam, and they reveal that they are seeing these demons too...

COMMENTARY: How, as a living, self-aware organism does a human being broach his own or her own impending end? As death comes, what thoughts or feelings do we countenance? Does our life pass before our eyes, from start to finish, like some epic lyric poem? Do we dwell only in our tragedies and personal shortcomings? Or instead, do we imagine those things— *those untaken paths*— that will never come to pass?

As all brain activity ceases and life slips away, does a lifetime of experience culminate in fear of cessation? Or does the mind undergo some form of transcendence instead?

Obviously, the answer is ... *nobody knows*.

Death is the last great boundary, the last momentous frontier of the human equation. Religions and spiritual movements have sought answers about death since mankind first stood upright, but we are no

nearer today, in the twenty-first century, than we were then in our prehistory, to really understanding death. To some people it is simply a passage to oblivion. To some it is salvation. And to others, the fear involved is one of eternal damnation and suffering.

Adrian Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder* is a scary, surreal and frequently heart-wrenching glimpse of the personal "death experience" of one man, Jacob Singer, who, like so many of us, is a study in contradictions. Jacob earned a doctorate in philosophy, for instance, but as the film opens, he is an infantryman, a soldier serving the U.S. Army in the Vietnam War.

Jacob is also a happily married family man who has faced tragedy in his life, the loss of a son, Gabe, in a terrible accident. But in his "death dream"—which makes up the bulk of the film— Jacob imagines a life outside the confines of his marriage with a co-worker named Jezebel (Pena) as his sexy paramour.

But this "alternate" existence of Jacob's mind is hardly exciting, or even particularly erotic. In fact, it is downright disturbing. Jezzie tells Jacob at one point that he has sold his soul "for a good lay" and that New York itself is "filled with creatures."



Reality isn't what it used to be: Jacob Singer (Tim Robbins) faces demons real and imagined, alongside his girlfriend Jezzie (Elizabeth Pena). In *Jacob's Ladder* (1990).

At a party, this prophecy seems to come true. Jezzie takes on the horrifying guise of a blackeyed demon, one who dances madly with the phallus-like tail of another hedonistic reveler, another devil. The implication is that, in surrendering to his desires, Singer actually wallows in his own personal Hell. The light is shut out of his life, including the light of love and family. Jezzie, a co-worker from the post office he once told his wife he was attracted to, has become, in this dying fantasy, his sexual companion. Yet, echoing the strongly moral stances of other 1990 horrors such as *Flatliners* and *Ghost* (also penned by Bruce Joel Rubin), the movie suggests this is not an ideal arrangement. This sexual relationship with a femme fatale represents Singer holding onto that which he must leave behind: his physical, Earthly, human drives. Jezebel represents the material aspect of his life. She's a thing of the body, not of the spirit.



Jacob Singer (Tim Robbins) is helped by Michael (Matt Craven), a man with a secret knowledge of his suffering, in *Jacob's Ladder*.

Lyne admirably eschews commonplace, Boschian imagery to tell Jacob's story and build a case about personal Heavens and Hells. In its place, he crafts a landscape of 1970s-style urban blight as Hell. Lyne sends his hero down into a nightmarish subway and on a trip through decaying hospital corridors: all places where there seems to have been overt societal neglect.

And that's a metaphor for Jacob's soul. It's in a state of neglect in

this death dream, holding on to those "material" things on Earth and ignoring the call of the spirit. He fantasizes about being with a sexy woman, but also longs to be reunited with his estranged family. He is a brilliant man too, but Jacob toils at a mind-numbing job in the post office, delivering the mail. And he keeps seeing all those strange creatures, which he interprets as demons because he is not heeding their call to transcend, to evolve and move on.

In other words, Jacob keeps descending his ladder to the subway when he should be walking upstairs towards the spirit of his son, Gabe, who beckons on a staircase landing. In the movie's finale, this point is made abundantly clear. Because Jacob is holding on to all the material aspects of his life, all the physical desires of human existence, he can't see what is being offered him. He must let go of fear, desire and other impulses ... and recognize Gabe for what he is ... an angel.

Jacob's advisor, a saintly chiropractor named Louis, specifically states all this material at one point. "The only thing that burns in Hell is the part of you that won't let go of life. Your memories. Your attachments.... So if you're frightened of dying and you're holding on, you'll see devils tearing your life away. But if you've made your peace, then the devils are really angels, freeing you from the Earth."

Another conversation between a physician and Jacob specifically refers to his predicament, as a man struggling at the doorway of death. "You've been killed. Don't you remember?"

In the end, of course, the doctor is right. We learn from the movie's final scene that Jacob has died in Vietnam. But at least, as we also know, he finds a measure of peace and acceptance when he is led "upstairs" by his much-mourned child, Gabe.

If taken as a statement about the nature of death, and as a personal, psychological vision of what death means (letting go; acceptance), *Jacob's Ladder* is an entirely involving and beautifully crafted film. The visuals are dazzling and frightening, and even trailblazing. Since *Jacob's Ladder's* premiere, for instance, many films have attempted to create the same sort of head-jerking, fast-motion, teeth-gnashing demons as those depicted here.

Lyne's choice to play Singer's death-dream in kind of malaise-filled, crisis-of-confidence, unending 1970s is illuminating and unique too. This was the era after the idealistic 1960s, the so-called era of the "wake-up from the hippie dream" according to my friend, the late poet Johnny Byrne, but also the age before the Yuppie, materialistic 1980s. The 1970s is a kind of perfect "purgatory" between decades, and not an inappropriate formation of eternal damnation.

And yet, even beyond its obvious narrative debt to Ambrose

Pierce's *Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (1890) and the cult horror *Carnival of Souls* (1962), *Jacob's Ladder* has a serious problem with its storyline.

Simply put, a good portion of the film's running time involves Jacob and his Vietnam War buddies discussing a strange conspiracy. Someone is trying to kill them, they suspect. Late in the film, Jacob learns from a character, a "hippie chemist" named Michael, that everyone in his platoon was unknowingly exposed to a government-created drug called "the ladder," which turned the American soldiers into fury-driven killing machines.

In fact, Jacob and his friends even turned on each other, and that's what accounts for the injuries that eventually kill Jacob.

There are sequences in *Jacob's Ladder* during which Jacob and Michael meet, and discuss the details of the Ladder, the day of the massacre in Vietnam and other specifics. Yet, this is all occurring in a dream, so why should Jacob dream of a conspiracy in his last seconds of mortality? Why should he dream of the Ladder, and more so, how could he dream of the ladder with such specificity, when at the time of the massacre, the time of his expiration, he no actual knowledge of it?

If the movie's ending is literal, and Jacob dies in the jungles of Vietnam after putting up a hell of a fight to stay alive, then everything else—Jezzie, Michael, the Ladder, the subway, New York of the 1970s—can only be interpreted as the dreams and hallucinations of a dying man. None of it is real. And yet *Jacob's Ladder* ends with a title card declaring that chemical warfare was a real aspect of the Vietnam War. That's certainly off-point, though, isn't it? Jacob—living and dying in Vietnam could have no memory or knowledge of any of this stuff. And this is supposed to be *his* story.

This subplot during *Jacob's Ladder* is an enormous narrative wrong turn down a blind alley, and it needlessly complicates a beautiful and meaningful film. This is a movie about one man's death experience, about his *acceptance* of death after his mind's initial refusal to accept it. To lurch into possible military conspiracies, government malfeasance and so forth adds nothing to that premise. The only possible reason it exists at all is to throw audiences off the path, so that they don't understand what is really happening to Jacob. They start to believe all the ghosts and demons may have some other real-life cause, or that the government is doing something to Jacob, when again, it is off-point entirely.

This dramatic flaw is nearly enough to disqualify a stylish, thoughtful and philosophical film from the stairway to Heaven. But

because *Jacob's Ladder* is so oft-imitated in terms of visuals (particularly in its depiction of demons), and because so much of this story is genuinely touching and frightening, perhaps we can move past the unnecessary drug-subplot and focus on the strong aspects of the film.

In that light, *Jacob's Ladder* features one of the most terrifying moments in all of 1990s horror cinema. Jacob Singer sits in a hospital bed, visited—at last—by his beloved family. He seems to be experiencing a much-needed respite from the world of demons and death during this welcome reunion. But then, a cold disembodied voice on the soundtrack suddenly states bluntly— out of nowhere—two words: "Dream on."

It's a blood-curdling enunciation, and one of subconscious self-recognition on Jacob's part. His family is not with him. He has no future in the mortal realm. He is dying. And that blunt, harsh, infinitely cold voice—coming up from a pit of oblivion to utter two inescapable, devastating words is utterly, profoundly chilling. It is the realization that life is a dream, that reality is not what we think it is.

In its musings about death, about the end we all fear, *Jacob's Ladder* proves a deeply affecting and meaningful motion picture. After a screening, you'll immediately want to hug the people you love and then go outside and breathe the fresh air, or otherwise affirm your very existence.

You'll want to remind yourself that you're going to live forever. You'll want to try to ignore the voice in your head telling you to "dream on."

Leatherface: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 3 * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"In the late 1980s, New Line Cinema got the idea to turn *Texas Chainsaw* into a franchise à la *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and hired splatter punk novelist David J. Schow to write this sequel. Schow, never one for subtlety, set out to make a bigger, faster, and unashamedly gory variation on Tobe Hooper's masterpiece. He turned the redneck Sawyer family into a homicidal SWAT team led by Viggo Mortensen, and pitted them against a city girl who believes that 'violence is no answer to violence.' Survivalist

Ken Foree shows up to protect her namby-pamby ass from the crazies until she un-learns her civilized, liberal-minded bullshit and starts to get her hands dirty. *Leatherface* seems to have all the right ingredients for a horror movie, but something went wrong in the execution. Director Jeff Burr, hired only days before shooting began and dedicated to making a pure example of 'old school nastiness,' allegedly turned in a gloriously gruesome cut, only to see it get trimmed down for a tame 80-minute theatrical release. An unrated DVD version restores the missing blood, but that only emphasizes the film's shortcomings: The film lacks mystery and suspense because it simply spends too much time with the new cannibal family. The result is that they quickly become comic rather than scary. Nevertheless, *Leatherface* demonstrates a true love of the genre and holds up much better than its nonsensical 1994 sequel *The Return of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre*."— Joseph Maddrey, *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*

"The third in the *TCMseries*, continuing the trend of each one being lesser than the last. This time out, the family is inexplicably 're-invented' for the first of several times, and the result is something which possesses only a shadow of the impact of the grueling 1974 Tobe Hooper original."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kate Hodge (Michelle); Viggo Mortensen (Tex); William Butler (Ryan); Ken Foree (Bennie); Joe Unger (Tinker); Tom Everett (Alfredo); Miriam Bird-Nethery (Mom); R.A. Mihailoff (Leatherface); David Cloud (Scott); Jennifer Banko (Little Girl); Ron Brooks (TV Newsman); Toni Hudson (Sara); Dwayne Whitaker (Kim); Michael Shamus Wiles (Checkpoint Officer).

CREW: New Line Cinema presents a Jeff Burr film. *Casting:* Annette Benson. *Music:* Jim Manzie. *Special Make-up Effects by:* Kurtzman, Nicotero & Berger, EFX Group. *Stunt Coordinator:* Kane Hodder. *Mechanical Effects:* Bellissimo/Beladonelli FX. *Chainsaw Fabrication:* Paul Byers, Jim Landis. *Costume Designer:* Joan Hunter. *Film Editor:* Brent Schoenfeld. *Director of Photography:* James C. Carter. *Based on characters created by:* Kip Henkel and Tobe Hooper. *Written by:* David J. Schow. *Produced by:* Robert Engelman. *Directed by:* Jeff Burr. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 81 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On a road trip from Los Angeles to Florida, Michelle (Hodge) and Ryan (Butler) drive past a mud pit containing sixty or seventy corpses, then pick up a hitchhiker named Tex (Mortensen) at a gas station called Last Chance. That night, the travelers are attacked by the chainsaw killer Leatherface (Milhailoff), and their car is totaled in a collision with an African American jeep driver, Bennie (Foree). Michelle must then endure a night of terror in Leatherface's farmhouse, where the madman has fallen in with a new family of crazy cannibals.



His motor is hummin': Leatherface (R.A. Mihailoff) returns in *Leatherface: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre III* (1990).

COMMENTARY: The third entry in the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* series, *Leatherface* is an entertaining if ultimately uninspired mainstreaming of the savage franchise initiated by Tobe Hooper and Kim Henkel in 1974. Cannibalism has been visually de-emphasized as a motivating factor, with brutal killings largely replacing that screen taboo. Nonetheless, the film is largely fast-moving, and makes some telling statements both about violence in general, and about class

warfare in America.

On the former front, *Leatherface* reworks a popular savage cinema trope: that "civilized" Americans have been neutered in the later years of the 20th century and cannot defend themselves unless landed in extreme situations and literally forced to fight back. This is the terrain, in large part, of both *Straw Dogs* (1972) and Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977).

In *Leatherface*, an affluent, middleclass woman named Michelle, after starting from the film's declaration "violence is no answer to violence," comes to reconsider that pacifist belief. In particular, there's what I term the film's "rock" test. At the film's start, Michelle can't bring herself to murder some dying road kill with a large rock, but she does, finally, club *Leatherface* (apparently to death) with one at the film's conclusion. Her lesson has been learned: in some cases only violence can answer violence. Civilization only extends so far.

This is a point that Ken Foree's character Bennie also understands. He's a survivalist who travels equipped for combat and is therefore largely ready to take on the cannibal clan. Still, it's odd that after having his head sawed by a chainsaw, Bennie emerges mostly unharmed at movie's end, the result of a re-shoot when test audiences demanded his survival.

Leatherface also posits a brand of cultural warfare in modern America between the coastal elites (Brian and Michelle, who drive a Mercedes) plus ethnic minorities (the African American Bennie), against those that 2008 vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin would no doubt term "real Americans," meaning pick-up truck driving, mid-west rednecks. In this case, however, the rednecks are cannibals. Still, they enjoy a traditional Southern diet ("all we need now is a mess of greens,") hurl racially-tinged descriptors ("You lost the darkie, didn't ya?"), and claim that technology is their friend since it gives them chainsaws, pick-up trucks and—inevitably—automated meat-hooks.

Bennie, when faced with this crowd, quips "nice neighborhood" and it's an explicit contextualization of the cannibal clan as heirs of the racial strife of the 1960s, particularly in the South. In other words, a black man finds he isn't wanted around, not in Southern white territory.



Leatherface (Mihailoff) reaches out to touch someone in *Leatherface*.

Despite many missteps, *Leatherface* is ultimately a pretty decent effort. Unfortunately, it in no way lives up to the classic preview trailer that advertised it. In that brief clip, a probing camera glides lakeside till a solitary figure is seen gazing meaningfully at the lapping water. To the strains of dignified classical music, an aged, old-as-the-hills-sounding narrator explains that while some stories are told, "then quickly forgotten," "legends are forever."

Suddenly, a glittering silver chainsaw emerges from the lake's still waters, like King Arthur's sword, Excalibur, and promptly ends up in the hands of the contemplative figure ... Leatherface, himself. He swivels towards the camera, his chainsaw revving...

That trailer is a beautiful bit of business, one evidencing real imagination and a sense of humor ... qualities not to be found in the actual film, alas. Fan response to the film was, accordingly, somewhat muted. Even though the film ekes out some victories, they are pale compared to the Tobe Hooper original.

Oddly, however, it seems that *Leatherface* is the template for the Michael Bay remake of 2003, especially as it too features a more mainstream seeming family, with both female and male figures ... and children too. This development goes to prove that the mainstreaming of the spiky Tobe Hooper production had finally been completed. The Saw is family ... and a franchise.

Luther the Geek * . (DTV)

Cast and Crew

CAST: Edward Terry (Luther Watts/"The Freak"); Stacy Haiduk (Beth Lawson); Joan Roth (Hilary Lawson); Thomas Mills (Rob); J. Joseph Clarke (Trooper); Tom Brittingham (Geek); Carlton Williams (Little Luther); Gil Rogers (Walsh); Chicke Klabunde (Carnival Woman); Karen Maurise (Mrs. Butler); David Pavlosky (Jason); Michael Boyle (Board Member 4); Robert Caraballo (Cook); Tom Wadsworth (Store Manager); Sigrid Norris (Teenage Girl); Gail Buxton (Old Lady at Bus Stop); Tris Brumbly (Police Officer); Martin Widener (Hunter).

CREW: Lloyd Kaufman and Michael Herz present a Troma Team Release, an Albright/Platts Film. *Costume Designer:* Laura Drawbaugh. *Production Designer:* Michael Beaudette. *Associate Producers:* Ernest Shapiro, Beth George. *Music:* Vern Carlson. *Special Effects:* Bill Purcell. *Director of Photography:* David Knox. *Film Editor:* Richard Smigieski. *Written by:* Whitey Styles. *Produced by:* David Platt. *Directed by:* Carlton J. Albright. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After twenty years institutionalized for the brutal murder of three, a geek named Luther Watts (Terry) is released on parole. Almost instantly, he resumes his killing ways, starting with an old woman at a bus stop (Buxton). Fleeing the police, Luther hides out at the Lawson house, terrorizing Hilary (Roth), and her beautiful daughter Beth (Haiduk). Luther kills Beth's boy friend (Rob) and then combats a dedicated trooper (Clarke) during a long night of terror. Hilary soon realizes that the only way to beat a geek ... is to become a geek.

COMMENTARY: Carlton J. Albright's Troma release, *Luther the Geek*, concerns a violent serial killer who wears metallic dentures and, during his vicious killing spree at an isolated farm, clucks and struts around ... just like a chicken.

I kid you not.

A concept as oddball as that can hardly be taken seriously, especially given a bizarre denouement which finds the film's hysterical final girl, Hilary, clucking appreciatively in response to Luther's fowl entreaties. At first, Hilary's clucks are tentative, unformed, but soon she's a fullthroated, chicken songstress extraordinaire.

Seriously, this is one of the funniest narrative gambits you've ever seen in a horror film. It's either genius or just plain nuts.

Yet overall, *Luther the Geek* seems to harbor no consistent sense of humor about the narrative's proceedings, or about any aspect itself, for that matter. Instead it aims to be "straight," savage horror.

On that front, sometimes it works well enough. There's a pulse-quickenning scene involving Luther's indelicate probe of Hilary's skirt with a rifle that, fortunately, doesn't end in a blood bath. Given the presence of such scenes, the film is violent, gory and occasionally tense, yet it is always clouded by the silly clucking killer and the silly premise, and the diffidence with which Albright depicts both.

For example, *Luther the Geek's* opening scene involves a parole board holding a vote to release Luther from state incarceration after twenty years. "Human beings have the capacity to change," argues one board member with heart-felt sincerity and passion. Another board member notes that Luther has been a model prisoner and learned his lessons. He's paid his debt to society.

But the attentive viewer will ask: how do these people know this? Luther can't even speak! Again, he just ... *clucks*. So how did he answer a therapist's questions to prepare for a parole report? How did he demonstrate his redemption and remorse to that therapist?

Given Luther's non-verbal nature, this parole board scene is utter nonsense. It either represents a conservative comment on "bleeding heart liberals" and the rate of recidivism in criminal rehabilitation, or it's just another awkward aspect of the movie that fails to make sense. Since the rest of the movie hinges on it, that's a problem.

Because nobody in their right minds—regardless of political ideology—would ever release a clucking and strutting metal-fanged geek from prison. And even given such an unexpected (and unmotivated) release from prison, why then would a freed Luther immediately start killing people again ... in public? At a busy bus stop of all places.

If he were really so impulsive, it's even more doubtful Luther would have been classified mentally sane in jail or released in the first place.

A mitigating factor in all this idiocy: youthful, ravishing Stacy Haiduk is featured here in a lengthy shower scene, and then performs in a nude simulated sex scene too. These factors alone may be worth a curious rental.

Luther the Geek opens with a voice-over reporting that "the geek is a modern American phenomenon." And the narrator isn't referring

to *Star Trek* fans, either. Still, even this portentous pronouncement doesn't make sense. The circus geek is a *historical* American phenomenon, isn't he? I mean, how many geeks are there running around in modern America of the 1990s?

Along with this nonsensical pronouncement, the film provides a brief history of unfortunate individuals who, like Luther, are so down-and out that they accept scraps of money to bite the heads off chickens. In a "crime in the past"-style prologue, we see young Luther attend a geek show and witness just such an event ... a traumatic event that changes him forever. He even loses his teeth in an accident (hence the metallic dentures).

But circus geeks—despite their dutifully noted desperation—are not mad-dog killers. They're often just drunks—or addicts. Director Albright has gone on record announcing that this movie was made to set the record straight on geeks ... but it doesn't do that at all. Geeks aren't serial killers. They're just ... desperate and kinda pathetic.

And *Luther the Geek* even seems to suggest that the audience should have some sympathy for Luther because he's so down on his luck and endured this bad experience in childhood. But again, Luther demonstrates no behavior worthy of compassion.

He just kills and ... *clucks*.

There's enough technical skill evident in *Luther the Geek* that one wishes the makers of the film had settled on a consistent narrative approach and tone and on crafting a horror movie of consequence. Instead, the movie just seems insipid. Even the jokes—like the trooper's comment "All right, chicken man, Colonel Sanders wants to fry your ass"—are delivered with an odd solemnity.

One can imagine how, given a different approach, *Luther the Geek* might have legitimately addressed aspects of the carnival, or the carnie existence. But since Luther is given no depth as a character, he's just another bogeyman with an unusual vocal proclivity.

And that makes this movie (despite the presence of lovely Stacy Haiduk), so much chicken shit.

***Maniac Cop 2* * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Robert Davi (McKinney); Claudia Christian (Sarah Riley); Michael Lerner (Commissioner Doyle); Bruce Campbell (Jack Forrest); Laurene Landon (Theresa Mallory); Robert Z'Dar (Matt Cordell); Clarence Williams III (Blum); Leo Rossi (Turkell); Lou Bonacki (Detective Lovejoy); Charles Napier (Lew Brady); Danny Trejo (Prisoner); Sam Raimi (Newscaster).

CREW: The Move House Sales Company Ltd. And Fadd Company presents a Larry Cohen production, a William Lustig film. *Casting:* I.D.G. Associates, Ira Belgrade. *Stunts:* Spiro Razatos. *Production Designer:* Gene Abel. *Music:* Jay Chattaway. *Film Editor:* David Kern. *Director of Photography:* James Lemmo. *Executive Producer:* David Hodgins. *Written and produced by:* Larry Cohen. *Directed by:* William Lustig. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The undead "maniac cop," Matt Cordell (Z'Dar), continues his quest for justice, murdering all those who oppose him, including police heroes Forrest (Campbell) and Mallory (Landon). When Cordell, a crazy serial killer named Turkel (Rossi) and another criminal (Williams III) kidnap police psychologist Sarah Riley (Christian) and plot a huge jail-break at Sing-Sing, it's up to hard-boiled Det. McKinney (Davi) to get Commissioner Doyle (Lerner) to "cop" to his role in framing and murdering the once-heroic Cordell.

COMMENTARY: William Lustig's *Maniac Cop 2* fits the bill of "a sequel that's an equal." It's a gritty, night-time *film noir*, a bloody horror movie, and a brilliantly-orchestrated action-flick all in one. Although horror fans may be saddened to see icon Bruce Campbell get killed early on (by the 23-minute point, actually), they'll be cheered by the effects, the jaw-dropping stunts, and the evenhanded morality tale, which notes both police corruption in the ranks at City Hall and champions individual work-a-day cops like Davi's sardonic McKinney and Christian's appealing cop psychologist, Riley.

Vividly photographed in authentic urban locations and mostly at night, *Maniac Cop 2* really picks up steam at about the forty-five minute point, when the movie introduces a deranged serial killer named Turkell (Rossi), who is preying on strippers and, strangely enough, forges an unlikely friendship with the undead Cordell. Turkell takes the Maniac Cop back to his apartment and offers him a drink. More than that, he becomes Maniac Cop's ally for a time, at least until Cordell no longer needs him.

The theme of the film, that Cordell is using thugs on the street to get to the high-ranking City Hall officials, including Lerner, in order to clear his name, works well enough, though at times it's hard to believe

that a super cop like Cordell would team with such scum. Still, it's almost no matter: the beating undead heart of *Maniac Cop 2* rests not in specifics of narrative, but in a series of amazing—and almost anachronistic in the 1990s—liveaction (non-digital) action sequences.

In one of the film's most harrowing action sequences, Cordell handcuffs Riley to a car exterior and then sets the car racing along a highway. Like most of the film, this scene is set at night, making the explosive pyrotechnics all that more impressive-looking as the car speeds across a bridge, through oncoming traffic, and headlong into disaster, all while an intrepid stunt person "rides" the exterior driver's side door. This sequence looks and feels authentically dangerous.

Later, Lustig outdoes this considerable achievement with an all-out assault by Cordell on a busy urban police station. Glass windows are shattered by the dozen, blood sprays everywhere (including near the camera), and one unlucky police captain gets hurled—and smashed—through a series of wooden ceiling partitions. It's gleeful, wanton destruction that is absolutely credible, visually establishing Cordell's avenging power.

Two other strong action sequences also come to mind. The first involves a flashback to Cordell's time in prison. Doyle has sent a cadre of thugs to murder the wrongly-incarcerated Cordell, and they come for the cop (with knives) while he's in the shower ... naked. What follows is a brutal fight involving a nude Z'Dar and at least three assailants, and it is choreographed splendidly. The other powerful scene involves the undead Cordell returning to prison and—all while on fire (for a long, long time, it seems)—going after the assailants from the shower scene. The fire effects are, like the rest of the movie's violence, incredibly impressive.

At the dawn of the age of CGI, this rock-'em, sock-'em exploitation movie relies exclusively on deftly-handled practical effects and stunts and is all the stronger for it. The film's story is good enough to accommodate so much action, and the actors are skilled in creating characters we care about. But the bottom line is that *Maniac Cop 2* packs a punch, memorably—and in fiery fashion—bringing Cordell's quest for justice to life.

***Misery* * * * .**

"Sheldon has sold his soul to the devil for material gain (the first *Misery* novel paid for his house, the second for his daughter's dental work, etc.) and in an attempt to renege on his side of the bargain, the Faustian hero finds himself dragged to Hell, where he is banished to dwell in the company of his own personal demon."—Mark Kermode, *Sight and Sound Film Review*, Volume: May 1991 to April 1992, BFI Publishing, page 17

"Am I the only horror fan on Earth who thinks this adaptation of Stephen King's last truly great novel is grossly overrated? It was inevitable that Rob Reiner would need to tone the violence down a notch to meet the lily-livered requirements of Hollywood and the MPAA, but the end result is too devoid of the book's viscerally nasty tone. I don't want to begrudge the astoundingly talented Kathy Bates her Oscar, so let's just say she deserved one even more for either *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Dolores Claiborne* or both. Good as her performance here is, at five-foot-three she's just visually wrong for the role of Annie Wilkes, who needs to be a big, imposing physical presence, capable of putting a beat-down on a man the size of James Caan as he slowly regains his strength. Perhaps a remake with Camryn Manheim? Now you're talkin'!"—John Bowen, *Rue Morgue*

"Great performances by both Kathy Bates and James Caan squeeze every ounce of angst out of a largely character-driven story that made beds frightening. Kathy Bates sells us on a character that would become parody by many other actors— you never doubt her sincerity, and Caan gives what might be the most understated performance of his career. It's not a fun movie to watch—most of it is excruciating, but it's all very nicely done."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"More a thriller than straight-up horror, this may have been the finest Stephen King adaptation since *The Shining* some ten years prior. It's the film that made Kathy Bates a star, and rightfully so, it also returned James Caan to the spotlight as the put-upon target of Bates' sadistic fixation. The woodblock scene is now among the most well-known in the entire horror canon."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

CAST: James Caan (Paul Sheldon); Kathy Bates (Annie Wilkes); France Sternhagen (Virginia); Richard Farnsworth (Buster); Lauren Bacall (Marcia Sindell); Graham Jarvis (Libby); Jerry Potter (Pete); Tom Brunelle (Anchorman)

CREW: Castle Rock Entertainment in association with Nelson Entertainment presents a Rob Reiner film. *Music:* March Shaiman. *Casting:* Jane Jenkins, Janet Hirshenson. *Co-Producers:* Jeffrey Stott, Steve Nicolaides. *Production Designer:* Norman Garwood. *Film Editor:* Robert Leighton. *Director of Photography:* Barry Sonnenfeld. *Based on the Novel Misery by:* Stephen King. *Screenplay by:* William Goldman. *Produced by:* Andrew Scheinman, Rob Reiner. *Directed by:* Rob Reiner. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 107 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After finishing his latest novel, writer Paul Sheldon (Caan) drives his car off a mountain road during a blizzard. He is pulled from the capsized car by his number one fan, Annie Wilkes (Bates). She nurses him back to health, tends to Paul's wounds and then holds him hostage when she learns he has killed the heroine Misery in her favorite franchise of books. Annie burns Paul's latest book and demands that he write a sequel that resurrects Misery. Paul has no choice to agree, even as he plots an escape.

COMMENTARY: During his long and incredibly successful writing career, novelist Stephen King has delved into fears of all variety, including the supernatural. His book *Misery*, however, arrived just in time for the decade of the interloper, and appropriately, it focuses on psychological horror, not ghosts, vampires or monsters.

Misery obsesses on the idea of control. How it feels to have it and how it feels to lose it. It charts the parameters of this conflict in a two person war for dominance between a writer and his "number one" fan. The dangerous fan, Annie Wilkes, is an interloper who inserts herself into Paul's life, who usurps his independence and even dictates what project he should next write.

Reiner's thriller commences with a number of insert shots which reveal just how much control wealthy author Sheldon exerts over his day-to-day existence. After finishing a novel, he indulges in a bottle of chilled champagne and a hand-rolled cigarette. He does so in his favorite hotel room, while his expensive sports car is parked outside. He is a man used to getting his way, used to controlling the environment around him. He is rich, and he treats himself with the finer things in life—and with elaborate rituals around them.



She's his biggest fan: a portrait of Annie Wilkes (Kathy Bates) from Rob Reiner's *Misery* (1990).

The creeping terror of Annie Wilkes is that she totally and completely usurps Paul's sense of control over his own life. Unable to walk, he becomes confined to bed. Unable to stand the pain of his injuries, he is dependent on Annie for his pills, his medicine. Paul is further humiliated when he must urinate in a bedpan in her presence, and then she manhandles the full bottle in front of him clumsily. Before, he had control of the littlest things, now the things he took for granted are beyond his capacity to manage. In one notable sequence, Paul even loses control of his thoughts, his professional purview as a writer: he is forced to burn the only copy of the book he just completed and then told by Annie what he must write next ... another *Misery* novel. A writer is the kind of person who thrives on a sense of control and so Annie Wilkes is the writer's worst nightmare.

For one thing, Annie is cloying and suffocating, but worse, she's a moralist and anti-intellectual who considers herself right about a number of ideas even though she's ignorant and uneducated. She hates profanity, even if it is authentic. She is dismissive of college, knowledge, reality, drama and everything that doesn't fit into her very narrow world view. Annie has a huge chip on her shoulder and doesn't like to feel stupid, which makes her dangerous. She is also delusional: she actually believes that after burning Paul's book and trapping him

in her house, he would sit down to a celebratory dinner with her and "enjoy it."

His toast at that dinner is, naturally, to *Misery*. Not to the romance book character, but to Paul's misery in the care of a depressive, babymurdering, mood-swinging maniac. His number one fan.

In *Misery's* most harrowing scene, Annie decides to permanently make Paul her ward by hobbling him. She sets a wooden block between his feet, and then breaks each ankle with a sledgehammer. For one brief moment, we can see one of Paul's feet go horribly limp. It's a disgusting moment, and one of the most famous "signature" moments in 1990s horror.

Writing teachers always say "write about what you know," and from *Misery* we must intuit that Stephen King feels, in some sense, trapped by his own fame. We know he's written under a pseudonym before. We know he's tried to leave horror for fantasy and other genres. But now, thanks to *Misery*, we also know he's afraid of his fans and their devotion, just a little. Given that *Misery* involves a writer's number #1 fan going crazy, it's entirely appropriate then that Paul's agent is played by Lauren Bacall, who dealt with a psychotic fan of her own in 1981's *The Fan*.

Misery is likely one of the better King film adaptations to come down the pike, in either the eighties or nineties, despite the fact that it is only barely better than average in terms of technical prowess. Reiner makes good use of cross-cutting to ramp up the tension when Annie returns home during one of Paul's escape attempts, but otherwise he charts a conservative path: focusing on a surfeit of distorting close-ups of Bates to sell the story. Perhaps that was a wise choice to go in close on Bates so often: she won an Academy Award for the role, and she does create a memorable psychotic, one with extreme bi-polar swings. Still, it would have been great if the film had found a style that broke out of the TV mold, a style that made the story seem like more than just a war between two talking heads.

Misery's biggest flaw involves the original characters it creates for the film: a kindly senior citizen police brigade played by Frances Sternhagen and Richard Farnsworth. Their characters, Virginia and Buster, weren't in the novel, but they come to life with such charm and quirkiness that it's positively unforgivable when Buster takes a shotgun blast in the gut and dies. Not so much that he comes to a bad end (we expect that in a horror movie, after all) but that Virginia isn't even given a single scene to respond to or mourn the demise of her husband.

Why, there isn't even a shot of her weeping, once all is said and done and the dust has settled. That's not just sloppy moviemaking, it's cruel. As Annie Wilkes would no doubt tell us at this juncture, it's a cheat to build up loveable, idiosyncratic characters with great flourishes of dialogue and screen-time and then just drop 'em like hot potatoes in the vain hope the audience will forget them.

That's not the way you make a COCK-ADOODIE thriller, all right?

***Mr. Frost* * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jeff Goldblum (Mr. Frost); Alan Bates (Felix Detweiler); Kathy Baker (Dr. Sarah Day); Jean-Pierre Cassel (Inspector Corelli); Daniel Gelin (Simon); Francois Negret (Christopher Kovac); Maxime Leroux (Frank Larcher); Vincent Schiavelli (Angelo); Roland Giraud (Raymond Reynhardt); Catherine Allegret (Dr. Corbin); Mike Marshall (Patrick Hollander); Henri Serre (Andre Kovac); Charley Boorman (Thief); Boris Bergman (Victor Sabowsky); Phillip Polet (Roland Day); Herve Laudiere (Joseph); Aina Walle (Carol); Patrice Melennec (Phil); Jo Sheridan (Jogger); Raymond Aquilon (Elias); Catherine Cyler (Christie); Elisabeth Forgo (Patient); Herve Langlois (Racket); Louise Vincent (Louise); Steve Gadler (Archer).

CREW: SVS Presents an AAA Film. *Casting:* Deborah Brown, Amanda McKee, Michel Jaclard, Marie Sylvie Pinquer. *Costume Design:* Judy Shrewsbury. *Director of Photography:* Dominique Brenguier. *Film Editor:* Ray Lovejoy. *Art Director:* Max Berto. *Music by:* Steve Levin. *Executive Producers:* Michael Holzman, Stephane Marsil, Claude Ravier. *Written by:* Brad Lynch, Derry Hall, Louise Vincent, Philip Setbon. *Directed by:* Philip Setbon. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 104 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In England, Inspector Felix Detwiler (Bates) captures a notorious serial killer, Mr. Frost (Goldblum), who has allegedly killed some two dozen people, seven of whom were children. Years later, the incarcerated Mr. Frost is transported to St. Clare's mental hospital, where he agrees to undergo therapy if and only if it is conducted by beautiful Dr. Sarah Day (Baker). Before long, Sarah finds some compelling evidence that Frost is, as he claims, actually Satan himself.

That's exactly what Frost has been hoping for, an opportunity to prove himself "real" to a scientist in a world where "knowledge has replaced faith."

COMMENTARY: The allure of evil is at the beating heart of *Mr. Frost*, which, like many 1990s horror films, involves a serial killer of more-than human dimensions. In particular, the titular character in the film thinks he is the Devil. Some evidence seems to support this theory: no one knows Frost's first name, he seems to boast no nationality, and no one knows where he came from. Oddly, buzzing flies also seem to congregate around Frost. And when captured on videotape, the man does appear genuinely demonic in at least one instance, his eyes fiery, burning red orbs.

Of course, that could just be a trick of the light...

This mystery man toils on Earth to "set some things right," he states, and to reveal to the world its "impotence" in the face of genuine evil. Frost believes that the only way to accomplish this mission is to convince a woman of science and rationality that he is what he says he is: Evil Incarnate. If a logical, knowledge-minded, 20th-century person can believe in the Devil, anyone can, he hopes.

But Frost wants to take it one step further too. If a rational woman can commit murder, because she believes he is the Devil, then that one irreparable act will be a negation of all man's technological and scientific progress over the millennia.

Meanwhile, Dr. Day arrogantly presumes she can get to the truth about her new ward on her own terms. "The reason I went into psychiatry in the first place was cases like this," she notes blithely, unaware that Frost is playing on her hubris and faith in medicine (which is "not an exact science," according to the serial killer).

An elaborate game between Dr. Day and her patient ensues, and this film foreshadows the kind of one-on-one/male-female personal interviews that dominate Jonathan Demme's watershed *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). This personal, even intimate, approach makes the film a kind of intellectual delight, as the back and forth between doctor and devil grows ever more heated.

"You remind me of a washed-up actor who is trying to make a comeback," says Dr. Day dismissively. But Frost is not to be denied. He causes another patient in the hospital to go on a killing spree, murdering a priest and rabbi, and apparently makes one doctor spontaneously bleed during a chess game. And, then, miraculously, Day's crippled, paralyzed brother regains the ability to walk. Did he sell his soul to the Devil? To Frost? How can she not see this for what

it is: a miracle?

Jeff Goldblum stars as Mr. Frost, and the actor certainly makes for a charismatic Devil. Goldblum practically oozes sexuality, charm and menace in the role, and you can see why, well, Evil has often been described as irresistible. Goldblum's swaggering, powerful, aggressively-physical persona draws Day ever deeper into his orbit, and there's an unspoken but potent sense of sexual attraction between the two leads. In one dream sequence, Day imagines kissing Frost, her subconscious desire come to life. But that desire walks hand in hand with fear, and there's a creepy scene late in the film during which Day thinks she sees Frost's eyes staring at her from her rear-view mirror.

Like *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Mr. Frost* makes considerable effort to remain ambiguous. All of Frost's "miracles" could be believably written off as something other than supernatural intervention, whether mental illness or just bad luck. Yet Day becomes convinced—as the audience does—that Frost is truthful—that he is, in fact, Satan manifest on Earth. Frost's diabolical nature is also asserted by the film's timely switches to a new color canvas: an icy (*frosty?*) blue during his moments of triumph, as Day moves to kill Frost using Detwiler's handgun, and as he confides in Detwiler his wife's last thoughts on this Earth.

Remembering that eyes are windows to the soul, *Mr. Frost* also occasionally pictures objects in the irises of the characters. Early on, we see crucifixes "reflected" in Frost's eyes, and near the end of the film, we see that Day's eyes are alight with stars. These images reinforce the idea of the characters representing schools of thought: the evil Frost representing faith (the crucifixes) and the rational Day representing science (which casts its eyes to the stars above).

Another inventive twist : in some bizarre sense, Frost is doing God's work on Earth too. He initially dismisses Day by saying that she believes in "neither God" nor "The Devil." If he convinces her he is Satan, it is an unspoken truth that God also exists, right? Frost's triumph is not just a triumph for pure evil but the foundations of faith re-asserted as a guidepost for human philosophy.

The last images of *Mr. Frost* suggest that the Devil has changed bodies and entered the body of Dr. Day: she is surrounded by buzzing flies, just like Frost had been on earlier occasions. So by acknowledging evil, the good doctor has been consumed by it. It's an unnerving, downbeat ending to a small but good horror film that debates the direction of mankind.

It may be better to be seduced by evil, the film suggests, than to toil on, endlessly, in a world without God. At least the existence of the

former offers the implicit presence of the latter.

Night of the Living Dead * * *

Critical Reception

"Savini's tendency to emulate the original movie, which proves to be a strength initially, sometimes seems slavish and unnecessary as the film progresses."—Dan Perez, *Cinefantastique*, "Tom Savini superbly reinterprets the George Romero classic," Volume 21, Number 5, April 1991, page 59

"You definitely get the sense watching this film that Tom Savini should direct more films. The script deviates in some important places from the original and that was a smart decision—it keeps you wondering what's going to happen—this film is never predictable. Some of Savini's shots are reminiscent of Civil War photographs. The characters are, if anything, more disagreeable than in the original, and one hopes that Romero and Russo et al. finally made some money from this version."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"Ironically, with fewer restrictions on screen violence than the 1968 original had to face, this Tom Savini-directed remake packs much less of a punch. Not only is it somewhat tamer, it is also lacking much of the original social message, and the pandering transformation of Barbara into a Sarah Connor-esque feminist poster child is most unfortunate."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Tony Todd (Ben); Patricia Tallman (Barbara); Tom Towles (Cooper); McKee Anderson (Helen); William Butler (Tom); Bill Mosley (Johnnie); Heather Mazur (Sarah); Kate Finneran (Judy Rose); Pat Logan (Uncle Rege).

CREW: A Manahem Golan Production. *Casting:* Meredith Jacobson, Donna Belajac. *Producer:* Declan Baldwin. *Special Effects:*

John Vulich, Everett Bunnell. *Music*: Paul McCullough. *Film Editors*: Tom Dubensky, Cletus R. Anderson. *Director of Photography*: Frank Prinzi. *Executive Producers*: George A. Romero, Menahem Golan. *Based on the Screenplay by*: John A. Russo and George A. Romero. *Screenplay by*: George A. Romero. *Produced by*: Russ Streiner. *Directed by*: Tom Savini. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Barbara (Tallman) visits her mother's grave with her brother Johnny (Mosley) just as the dead are mysteriously rising from their graves. After Johnny is killed, Barbara seeks sanctuary in a local farmhouse where she meets up with a strong, resourceful African American, Ben (Todd), a treacherous racist, Mr. Cooper (Towles), and his family, plus scared youngsters Tom (Butler) and Judy Rose (Finneran). The re-animated ghouls lay siege to the house over a long, bloody night, but the fireworks inside are just as terrifying, especially when Ben and Cooper become angry opponents over a leadership role. Even as Ben and Cooper bicker, Barbara suggests a third way...

COMMENTARY: George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) probably didn't need to be remade at all, but so far as modern remakes go, this isn't a bad reinterpretation of the classic material. Savini's *Night of the Living Dead* successfully tows the line between faithfully re-telling the original story and providing several narrative surprises when and where it is able to do so. The result is an enjoyable film, if not one in the same class as the revolutionary, trail-blazing original.

One of the great, enduring values of Romero's original film is its gritty, authentic look. Shot in grainy black-and-white and with expressive but effective camera compositions, the 1960s *Dead* looks like found newsreel footage of an unfolding apocalypse. Because it doesn't seem like your average Hollywood movie, the original film is much more unsettling than typical fare of its day.

The notorious flesh-eating sequence is shot with such straight-faced bluntness, such a lack of movie decorum, that audiences leave the film convinced they've seen something apocalyptic and wholly disturbing. In other words, the Romero movie seems to be happening to you as you watch, and thus there's a distinct sense of immediacy to it. Much as you might want to, you can't dismiss this aspect of the original *Night of the Living Dead*. It haunts you. It resonates, even some forty years after its production.

By point of contrast, Savini's 1990 remake is shot in bland, unassuming color, with no attempt to express the horror in the mise-en-scène. The movie looks more professional to be certain, but is also more mainstream and cartoony. In an effort to broaden the appeal of

the material, the movie avoids the grotesque feasting scenes of the original, making do with a few shots of confused zombies eating bugs and small animals. This is upsetting. Twenty-two years after the original *Night of the Living Dead*, Hollywood is producing tamer horror films?

Even many special effects moments in this remake feel shoddy, a shock given Savini's role as director. But the scene in which Barbara repeatedly bludgeons a fat farmer zombie with a fireplace implement is downright embarrassing. Her opponent is clearly a rubber torso bobbing up and down—puppeteered—and no satisfactory attempt is made to cloak that fact.

Tonally, the film is overly simplified too. In the original film, Cooper and Ben still clashed, but the characters didn't seem to be two-dimensional posturing machines. Here, Harry Cooper is such an over-the-top numbskull it's a wonder nobody kills him sooner. Towles plays the part without subtlety and so, in some way, the viewer can dismiss Cooper. He's just a stupid redneck; he's just a bigot; he's just an asshole with a gun. The movie forgets that not only must the zombies be "us" but the human characters must be "us" as well. The original Harry Cooper made sense, just in a nasty, obnoxious way. The new Harry Cooper never makes any sense at all and is just a continual fly in the ointment.

Furthermore, Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* was never so on the nose and preachy as this remake, which comes right out and declares its central conceit for the audience. The remake spoon-feeds us the main idea by having Barbara flat-out state "They're us. We're them and they're us." Sadly, Romero utilizes the same trite theme as late as 2007's *Diary of the Dead*, apparently out of new ideas. This is subtext without the "sub."

Is the remake of *Night of the Living Dead* a total loss? Not by a long shot. Where George Romero's script proves abundantly clever is in serving up several fresh surprises in a familiar story outline. This means that the first man Barbara encounters in the graveyard is not the expected zombie, but rather a shell-shocked victim, an undertaker. Then the zombie comes, and it's a good, unexpected shock.

This approach means that Ben doesn't survive the majority of film only to be shot by the numbskull local authorities, but instead becomes a zombie. This means that Cooper takes refuge in an attic—not the basement—and also survives the attack ... until Barbara kills him.

These updates may not seem all that important, but they play successfully with audience expectations and the way to make a scary

movie is to keep an audience—especially a knowledgeable audience—off base.

Most impressively, the 1990 version of *Night of the Living Dead* seems to reflect a very real scenario of the decade. And that is, simply put, polarization, about Pat Buchanan's "culture war." In the national dialogue, matters of problem-solving had become less important than political scorekeeping. The Democrats were on one side; the Republicans were on the other, and instead of working together to tackle real national concerns, the national dialogue descended to a level of "gotcha."

This is the very problem we see played out in the remake. Cooper and Ben are so entrenched in their own opinions, so invested in their sides, that they refuse to budge even when logic, even when survival dictates that they do so. They are so concerned about "who is boss," that they can't successfully navigate their way out of the crisis.

Their partisan squabbling ends up with valuable resources squandered (in the case of the broken television) and reconciliation a virtual impossibility, except by the efforts of the younger, less entrenched generation (Tom, Judy Rose and Barbara), which seeks to stamp out the polarization. At least three times, Barbara and the others demand that Ben and Cooper stop quarreling ... but they can't.

Old habits die hard.

By contrast—and explicitly forecasting the arrival of Clinton—Barbara offers a "third way." Instead of arguing about basement/upstairs, she suggests the only workable alternative: escape the house entirely before the enemy's numbers reach critical mass. She is ignored, of course, but her way—the third way—proves to be the right one. "We could walk right past them," she insists again and again, but her suggestion lands on deaf ears.

For fans of the *Dead* series, this remake does prove an interesting bridge between films. After Barbara escapes the farmhouse, we see her at the very redneck picnic that the characters fly over via helicopter in *Dawn of the Dead*. In fact, that news helicopter is even visible in a shot here. A zombie cage match in this *Night of the Living Dead* also is a foreshadowing of the matches as seen in the 2005 follow-up, *Land of the Dead*.

Long story short: when Savini's *Night of the Living Dead* recreates moments from the original film, like the hammer-and-nails siege sequence or the classic law-enforcement line, "They're dead ... they're all messed-up," it fails rather egregiously to surpass or even equal the 1968 landmark.

However, when *Night* goes in its own direction, dealing out unexpected surprises in familiar situations, the film frees itself, and even at times becomes truly scary. But longtime Savini and Romero fans are definitely not going to be happy about the worm eating, bug eating sequence.

Zombies shouldn't just eat bugs and worms. They should eat people. Twenty years on from *Night of the Living Dead*, that should have been a given.

LEGACY: George A. Romero's *Dead* films continued in the 2000s with three controversial entries, 2005's *Land of the Dead*, 2007's terrible *Diary of the Dead* and 2010's *Survival of the Dead*.

Nightbreed * * *

Critical Reception

"Barker spins grisly fantasy out of sexual obsession, yet his style here couldn't be less obsessive. It's cluttered and rather incoherent, as though the trailers to four different horror movies had been spliced together."—Owen Gleiberman, *Entertainment Weekly*, March 2, 1990, <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,316846,00.html>

"An interesting hodgepodge of things Lovecraftian through the eyes of Clive Barker with a memorable score by Danny Elfman, you definitely sensed you were glimpsing a piece of a larger mythology here. It's interesting to compare this film to *The X-Men* films, showing the world of outsiders living on the borders of our own."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"One of the finest horror films of this period, it is often unfairly overshadowed by that overrated other Clive Barker adaptation, *Hellraiser*. Nevertheless, we have an underground community of bizarre mutants, a militia of angry inbreds, and a truly sinister cameo from David Cronenberg. They all add up to a movie that has rightfully attracted a passionate cult following."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

CAST: Craig Sheffer (Aaron Boone); Anne Bobby (Lori); David Cronenberg (Decker); Charles Haid (Captain Eigerman); Hugh Quarshie (Detective Joyce); Hugh Ross (Narcisse); Doug Bradley (Lylesberg); Catherine Chevalier (Rachel); Bob Sessions (Pettine); Malcolm Smith (Ashberry); Oliver Parker (Peloquin); Deborah Weston (Sheryl Ann); Nicholas Vince (Kirok); Simon Bamford (Ohnaka); Kim and Nince Robertson (Babette); Christine McCorkindale (Shuna); Tony Bluto (Gomm); Vincent Keone (Devil Tude); Bernard Henry (Baphomet); Richard Van Spill (Drummer); George Roth (Kane); Tom Hunsinger (Tommy); Stephen Hoyer (Gibbs); John Agar (Decker's Victim).

CREW: James G. Robinson and Joe Roth Present a Morgan Creek Production of Clive Barker's *Nightbreed*. *Special Make-up and Visual Effects:* Image Animation. *Production Designer:* Steve Hardie. *Director of Photography:* Robin Vidgeon. *Film Editors:* Richard Marden, Mark Goldblatt. *Music:* Danny Elfman. *Based on the novel Cabal by:* Clive Barker. *Executive Producers:* James G. Robinson, Joe Roth. *Produced by:* Gabriella Martinelli. *Written for the screen and directed by:* Clive Barker. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 102 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A man named Boone (Sheffer) suffers from terrifying nightmares, and they all concern a city of monsters called Midian, a place where all his sins will be forgiven. Boone's psychiatrist, Dr. Decker (Cronenberg)—really a craven psychopath—accuses Boone of committing the murders of six families in ten months and arranges for Boone to be killed by the police. Meanwhile, Boone's grieving girlfriend Lori (Bobby) also heads to Midian for answers regarding Boone's death, only to descend into a strange underworld. As she soon learns, Boone is alive and undergoing a process of "becoming." But Decker is also headed to Midian, with the police not far behind.

COMMENTARY: Clive Barker's *Nightbreed* should have been a masterpiece. And somewhere, lurking deep inside it— *like the monster within us all*— perhaps there is still a masterpiece waiting to be unearthed.

It's widely known that this eleven million dollar film (adapted from Barker's 1988 novella, *Cabal*) was treated poorly by 20th Century-Fox upon its release in February of 1990. The movie was sold and marketed as a slasher film, but much more gravely, aggressively re-edited down from two-and-a-half hours to a mere hundred-and-two minutes. What should have been and perhaps what *could* have been an

epic is thus reduced to something of a bloody mess.

But *Nightbreed* is a promising mess, to be sure. The movie features grand motives and aspirations, and like many 1990s films actually concerns a deeper issue than one would suspect: it's a study in bigotry and the acceptance of one's heritage, tradition, and very nature, even if that nature is not accepted, or worse, despised, by society at large.

"Everybody has a secret face," *Nightbreed* reminds us, and in exploring that idea, the movie also asks audiences to consider the definition of the word "monster." The film's protagonist, Boone (Sheffer), is of other-than-human descent. Even though he "passes" as a member of the dominant white, human culture, his secret face is that of the legendary "Nightbreed," a monster living in the sanctuary called Midian. In terms of character, Boone's heart is good and strong.

Oppositely, the deranged Dr. Decker (Cronenberg) is a full-blown human being. Yet he is a "monster" and a murderer: a sadist and villain.

Similarly, mankind's chosen form of authority, the police, are personified in Charles Haid's character, Captain Eigerman, as racist, redneck and dependent on Gestapo-style tactics. Eigerman launches a brutal raid on the monsters of Midian because ... they look like monsters—because they look different from what he is used to and what he is comfortable with. Embracing a shoot first, ask questions second attitude, the police in *Nightbreed* represent a comment on nothing less than institutionalized racism.

The colorful and often oddly beautiful monsters of Midian in *Nightbreed* are by contrast the "despised others," a displaced minority now holding on to their only place remaining on Earth. As this minority suffers, it clings to tradition and faith. The monsters speak of "The Tribes of the Moon" and the movie depicts a resurrection ritual performed by the Elders. This deep-seated sense of faith we see is explicitly contradicted with the hateful ideology of the human attackers. Decker believes himself to be "Death" itself, cleaning up vermin, and his attitude can be interpreted as a statement about fascism; he may as well be a Nazi cleaning out a ghetto of Jews. Similarly, Eigerman uses "God" as his justification to kill ("we're going out there with God on our side!") So one people bring life; another people bring death.



The good doctor (David Cronenberg) has taken up murder in a publicity photograph from Clive Barker's *Nightbreed* (1990).



Fair to Midian: Boone (Craig Sheffer, right) discovers his fate and his origin in Clive Barker's monster mash, *Nightbreed*.

What wasn't widely known in 1990 but which is known today is that Clive Barker is homosexual. *Nightbreed* isn't explicitly about being gay, but it is about people being treated poorly by society because of what is essentially an unchangeable, preordained nature. Of course, you can apply that idea to skin color or sexual orientation, but in the great tradition of horror, Barker gives us a corollary in the term "monsters." So *Nightbreed* concerns man's inability to accurately distinguish "what is God's work and what is the Devil's work."⁵

Nightbreed is also Orphic in its storytelling approach. The Orpheus myth from the Greek traditions involves a descent into the Underworld and a search by the hero for something that has been lost. In the case of Orpheus, he has lost his lover, Eurydice, to the Underworld (she was bitten by a snake), and he must retrieve her there. *Nightbreed* sends Boone to the literal underworld of Midian (a world located beneath a cemetery), but what he brings back is the knowledge of his true nature. That's the thing that has been lost in the "above" world of mankind.

"What's below" must "remain below," however, a crucial lesson of the Orpheus myth, and in this case, the world is not ready to embrace the "monsters" that Boone brings to the surface upon his return. All-

out war is the result.

Nightbreed is a film of fascinating visions and sounds. The score by Danny Elfman is mysterious, wild and involving, and the sights of the film, from the monsters to the vast underground city, are amazing. Yet more often than not, the film fails to achieve its desired impact. Most of the humor goes flat, like the racist epithet "there goes the neighborhood," and the final battle sequence lasts so long that it ultimately becomes tiring. The performances are all over the map too. Anne Bobby (Lori) seems ill-at-ease, and doesn't capture audience sympathies. Even the great director David Cronenberg seems miscast, giving what amounts to a semi-tranquilized performance.

The monster make-ups, though glorious in design and execution, can't stand up to extended scrutiny, especially in many fully-lit sequences. What at first seems exotic, dangerous and gorgeous soon takes on a distinctly non-scary feel. The movie is not aided by its edited-down nature either. For instance, a priest shows up in a jail cell two thirds of the way through the film and plays a vital role in *Nightbreed* 's climax. But the audience doesn't know his name, or anything about him.

Sometimes terrible things happen to good directors, and *Nightbreed* is a perfect example. Clive Barker's movie is pulsing with ideas, intelligence, and potential, but saddled by bad, sometimes terrible execution. And it's not all the fault of the studio, either. Some moments in this epic fantasy play as too obvious, too lacking in subtlety and grace. Director's cut required.

***Pacific Heights* * * ***

Critical Reception

"The movie picks up a gleam of interest when we learn about the tenant's wealthy background, and we get a bit of a kick when he plugs Modine. Keaton has a way of being blandly still when the character is at his deadliest ... [and] with a little help from the writer and director, he could have been a memorable creep like Robert Walker in *Strangers on a Train*."— Pauline Kael, *Movie Love: Complete Reviews 1988–1991*, A William Abrahams Book, 1991, page 277

"First-time film scripter Daniel Pyne sets up a menacing cat-and-mouse game as sociopath Keaton plays the system to his advantage, finally provoking Modine into attacking him so he can go after his assets with a lawsuit. But the pic loses its grip when it tips over into psycho-chiller territory."— *Variety*, January 1, 1990

Cast and Crew

CAST: Melanie Griffith (Patty); Matthew Modine (Drake Goodman); Michael Keaton (Carter Hayes); Laurie Metcalf (Stephanie); Carl Lumbly (Mr. Baker); Mako (Mr. Watanabe); Dorian Harewood (Dennis Reed); Nobu McCarthy (Mira Watanabe); Beverly D'Angelo (Anne); Dan Hedaya (Loan Officer); Luca Bercovic (Greg); Tippi Hedren (Florence Peters); Jerry Hardin (Fidlow).

CREW: James G. Robinson Presents a Morgan Creek Production, a John Schlesinger Film. *Casting:* Mali Finn. *Music:* Hans Zimmer. *Film Editor:* Mark Warner. *Production Design:* Neil Spisak. *Director of Photography:* Amir Mokri. *Executive Producers:* James G. Robinson, Joe Roth. *Written by:* Daniel Ryne. *Produced by:* Scott Rudin, William Sackheim. *Directed by:* John Schlesinger. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 102 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An enterprising young couple, Drake (Modine) and Patty (Griffith), goes out on a financial limb to renovate and restore an "investment" property: an Old Victorian house in San Francisco. Their new renter, Carter Hayes (Keaton), however, turns out to be every homeowner's nightmare. He fails to pay the rent, changes the lock, breeds cockroaches and rips every fixture out of the dwelling. Every time Drake sets out to stop Carter, however, the tenant is one step ahead of him, creating a legal record of "harassment" that prevents the law from evicting Drake. Events reach a fever pitch when Carter gets out a temporary restraining order against Drake preventing him from returning to his house. There, Carter waits for Goodman to violate the order ... with a gun in hand.

COMMENTARY: If you're a long-time horror aficionado, you may remember Stephen King's dissection of *The Amityville Horror* (1979) in the master's literary study of the genre, *Danse Macabre*. He stated that the true horror expressed in that film was not related to devils or demons, or even the supernatural ... but rather home ownership—economics. John Schlesinger's *Pacific Heights* is essentially *The Amityville Horror* for the nineties, only with Michael Keaton as the

"demon" of this particular epoch: the sociopathic stalker or interloper. The movie itself plays "almost as a documentary on the horrors of landlord-tenant law."⁶

All the terror commences in *Pacific Heights* when a nice young yuppie couple, played by Melanie Griffith and Matthew Modine, try to get more than their fair share of the American pie. There's a classic Victorian house in San Francisco that needs lots of TLC, but they can't afford the princely sum of \$750,000 to purchase it. So "they fudge the numbers a little," decide to rent out two "units" in the house, and look at their over-extension not in terms of its imprudence, but rather as "an investment." Talk about irrational exuberance!

The nineties were the decade in which houses were no longer merely homes but ladder rungs to the high life, to personal wealth. Unfortunately, as the film points out, for everyone on the way up that ladder, like the film's protagonists, Drake and Patty, there was also someone coming down the rungs at same time, like Michael Keaton's fallen aristocrat, Carter Hayes. Carter is so desperate to hold on to his life of wealth and privilege after losing his family's fortune, that he turns his attention to ruining the lives of others—others like Drake and Patty. Accordingly, Hayes becomes the tenant from hell. He breeds cockroaches and lets them loose into the second apartment. He tears down all the very expensive fixtures in his apartment, down to the sinks and toilets. What this adds up to, essentially, is a big pain in the pocket book. Already on the verge of economic collapse for having "fudged the numbers a little" on their home loan, Drake and Patty are tipped over the edge by exterminator and lawyer fees.



Do you have renters insurance? Michael Keaton (right) plays Carter Hayes, the menacing tenant who destroys the financial well-being of yuppies Melanie Griffith and Matthew Modine in John Schlesinger's *Pacific Heights*.

Pacific Heights also trades on early 1990s white fears (leading up to the Day of the Angry White Man: Election Day 1994) that minorities are somehow impinging on the right of the white middle class to improve his economic lot.

Here, a paranoid Goodman worries about becoming the victim of a "minority scam artist" when a black man, Baker (Carl Lumbly), desires to rent his downstairs apartment. Accordingly, Drake rents the apartment instead to a sketchy white man (without even a credit check), while the black man's credit application is trampled underfoot inadvertently by Asian renters, and ultimately mislaid.

Late in the film, when Patty finally visits the police to file a complaint against Carter Hayes, she ends up reporting the sociopath to ... the black would-be tenant, Baker, and he says—without irony or attitude—"I guess you're wishing now you rented to the black man."

Although Patty and Drake are obviously the film's protagonists, right down to Drake's family name of Goodman (Good Man, get it?), they suffer greatly in the film because of their double transgressions. The first is avaricious over-extension: they cut corners, lie on their loan, and don't play by rules. The second transgression is this barelyconcealed racism. Still, *Pacific Heights* is solidly on their side,

unlike California Law, as the film repeatedly points out, as Patty takes the fight back to Hayes. She hits him where it hurts too: his credit card balance.

Pacific Heights is staged like a horror film of old, down to the obligatory scene in which Patty searches for a missing cat in a dark basement and the camera goes wobbly. Just as the scary score, a good effort by Hans Zimmer, goes silent, a bird jumps out to startle her, and we get our old friend, "the false scare." Similarly, all differences (economic and social) are resolved not in a court of law, but rather in the crucible of personal combat and violence as Patty and Drake impale poor old Carter on their copper toilet pipes.

Schlesinger's film is an entertaining effort that succeeds in making audiences, if not scared, at least highly agitated. Matthew Modine's character repeatedly says and does all the wrong things, coming off as hotheaded and arrogant with the police. Again and again, he chooses the wrong course of action (even violating a restraining order), and again and again, Carter Hayes chalks up another victory. We've all had to deal with people who are unfair, people who didn't pay us, or who cheated us. We've all had bills we couldn't pay, or dreams that didn't pan out. *Pacific Heights* is good at tapping into those feelings of discontentment, rage and powerlessness, and channeling them against the film's colorful villain. Keaton's Hayes is a real monster of an interloper, literally moving into someone's life and refusing to get out. By the end, you want to pick up the nail gun and kill him yourself, especially after the scene in which he provokes Drake into a fight following Patty's miscarriage.

There may be a good percentage of horror audiences who don't consider *Pacific Heights* a horror film at all, but Roger Ebert said it best: "There's not even the slightest attempt to present Keaton as a normal tenant who only slowly turns sinister. He's a monster from his first appearance—the Freddy Krueger of tenants. Maybe you can never really kill him, and we'll get *Pacific Heights* parts two, three and four, with Keaton moving into gentrified neighborhoods from coast to coast."⁷

***Predator 2* * * ***

Critical Reception

"The script, written by the Thomas brothers, is calculated

mayhem, filled with the dismal irony of *RoboCop* and the brooding fatalism of *Blade Runner*. Beautifully outfitted and moodily photographed, the movie is directed by Stephen Hopkins, the Jamaican-born Australian responsible for *Nightmare on Elm Street V*. He keeps the pedal to the metal but never allows the explosive action to minimize his actors. Preceded by an electronic hiss and a hallucinatory wobble, the Predator makes a marvelous monster. Maybe this is a sign of the times: It may be real ugly, but it's anti-drugs, pro-gun control and does nothing to harm the environment. Still, let's just hope it isn't pregnant."— Rita Kempley, *The Washington Post*, November 21, 1990

"Following up the original in an urban setting seemed like a natural, but perhaps too much of the urban setting took away from the central 'monster' aspect that this story needed. Danny Glover works fine as an action hero—the structure of the film is just too busy, and the final confrontation between Predator and Glover seems too rushed, with far too much emphasis on this film given to flashy lights and quick edits, the legacy of music videos corrupting still another film. It was fun to see the Alien skull on the wall, but how on Earth does Danny Glover survive that explosion at the end? Well, then again, how did Arnold in the first one?"— William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Danny Glover (Detective Michael Harrigan); Gary Busey (Special Agent Keyes); Bill Paxton (Jerry); Maria Conchita Alonzo (Leona); Ruben Blades (Danny); Adam Baldwin (Garber); Robert Davi (Hermann); Kevin Peter Hall (Predator); Calvin Lockhart (King Willie); Morton Downey, Jr. (Tony Pope); Kent McCord (Captain Pilgrim).

CREW: A Gordon/Silver/Davis Production of a Stephen Hopkins Film. *Casting:* Jackie Burch. *Music:* Alan Silvestri. *Executive Producers:* Michael Levy, Lloyd Levin. *Film Editor:* Mark Goldblatt. *Production Designer:* Laurence G. Paull. *Director of Photography:* Peter Levy. *Produced by:* Lawrence Gordon, Joel Silver, John Davis. *Based on characters created by:* Jim and John Thomas. *Written by:* Jim and John Thomas. *Directed by:* Stephen Hopkins. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 105 minutes.



The way of the warrior: The Predator returns in *Predator 2* (1990). And yes, that's a severed spine and skull in his left hand.

SYNOPSIS: In Los Angeles 1997, the police do battle with warring drug gangs at the same time that an invisible alien predator (Hall) arrives to hunt. An FBI agent Keyes (Busey) sets out to trap the extra-terrestrial hunter, but LAPD detective Harrigan (Glover) carries a personal grudge against the alien because it murdered his partner, Danny (Blades). After Keyes fails to contain the alien, Harrigan does battle with the beast on the rooftops of Los Angeles, a battle that

culminates inside a predator spaceship.

COMMENTARY: The original *Predator* (1987) cleverly merged two popular genres of the 1980s: the Rambo-style violent war movie which essentially saw Hollywood re-fight—and win—the morally murky and unpopular Vietnam conflict, and the tech-heavy, action-oriented science-fiction horror/thriller, exemplified by James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986).

In keeping up with the 1990s, *Predator 2* replaces the dated *Rambo* (1985) portion of that template with the most commonly-seen movie genre of the Clinton Decade: the Police Procedural. Thus, the titular alien hunter in Stephen Hopkins' high-adrenalin sequel battles a hardened, cynical Los Angeles homicide detective instead of a veteran soldier like the first film's hero, Dutch (Arnold Schwarzenegger).

In the role of harried, streetwise and ultimately extremely resourceful cop, Danny Glover plays much the same part as he does in the myriad *Lethal Weapon* films except that this time his name is Harrigan and he isn't partnered with Mel Gibson.

Perhaps, the most unique wrinkle in this film involves the time period. Although released in 1990, *Predator 2* is set in the future in a war-torn 1997. The film imagines Los Angeles as a realm of "record heat," "choking pollution" and "rampant crime." The city is ruled by warring foreign gangs, and the cops just attempt to hold their own against all sides.

Fortunately, the film was not prophetic. Los Angeles in the 1997 had some smog but nothing like the overpopulation and violence depicted in *Predator 2*.

The substitution of a near-future urban jungle for the jungles of Central America does not work quite as adroitly as one might hope in *Predator 2*. The natural locations of *Predator* were lush and beautiful and managed to make the clash between Dutch and his alien nemesis seem primeval. The great American soldier was reduced to the level of a prehistoric caveman in the battle for survival, forging his own weapons and slathering himself in mud to fight back against the ultimate warrior. But on these terms, mano a mano, the fight was breathtaking against that backdrop. The backdrop made it mythic, a great, prehistoric battle of warring species.

The cityscape of *Predator 2* is busier, uglier and noisier but doesn't carry the same mythic resonance. Consequently, the battle between Harrigan and the Predator somehow seems less important, less moving this time around. During the final battle, for instance, the Predator conducts emergency first aid on himself in an old woman's

apartment, and the moment is played mostly for laughs.

It doesn't help *Predator 2*, either, that the film seems to take forever to get started. Thanks to the successful first film in the franchise, the audience understands perfectly how the Predator operates from frame one of *Predator 2*. We know how it mimics the voices of its prey ("want some candy?"), we know how it goes after only warriors and leaves the innocent (like pregnant women) alone. We know it travels with medical kit and self-destruct equipment. We even know it comes to Earth on only the hottest years and uses a nifty, shimmery cloaking device to hunt.

Consequently, for much of the film the cops play catch-up, and nothing very original or new occurs. The film goes from violent shoot-out to crime scene examination while the cops discuss clues. It's dull. This means you can safely tune in at the hour point and really not have missed much. This criticism lodged, *Predator 2* picks up dramatically at the point that overbearing Gary Busey leads a team of government agents to trap the Predator in a slaughterhouse.

Predator 2 features some impressive camera gymnastics in the last act, thanks to Hopkins' stylish direction, and it also commendably begins to add new layers to the franchise mythos. For instance, the audience gets to travel inside the Predator ship this time, see a variety of individual Predators (some incredibly old, apparently), and even examine the bones of the hunters' other extra-terrestrial prey and trophies. In one famous moment, we see the skull of an Alien from the *Alien* film series lodged on a trophy wall, a brilliant and lasting connection between 20th Century-Fox films and the impetus behind the *Alien* vs. *Predator* films of the 2000s. *Predator 2* also establishes that the aliens have been hunting on Earth since before 1715, though it's hard to imagine how Revolutionary War Era heroes could have proven much of a challenge to this technologically-advanced species.

In terms of 1990s trends, *Predator 2* offers a few points worth mentioning. Aside from the police procedural format, the film eschews opening credits, a more and more common trend, and even makes a comment about tabloid television with the appearance of real life talk show host Morton Downey, Jr., as Tony Pope, of *Hard Line*. That this sequel is remembered positively at all probably has something to do with Hopkins' universally-in-motion camera work, fan affection for the scary Predator creature, and Alan Silvestri's adrenaline-provoking score.

"You admire the son-of-a-bitch?" Danny Glover asks Gary Busey at one point in the film, a derivative bit of dialogue clearly echoing Ripley's conversation with the android Ash in Ridley Scott's *Alien*.

My answer to Glover's query is that I wish I admired *Predator 2* just a little bit more.

***Prom Night 3: The Last Kiss* * * . (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Tim Conlon (Alex); Cyndy Preston (Sarah); David Stratton (Shane); Jeremy Ratchford (Leonard); Dylan Neal (Andrew); Courtney Taylor (Mary Lou); Roger Dunn Weatherall); Tom Nursall (Coach); George Chuvalo (Mr. Walker); Juno Miles Cockrell (Leah); Lesley Kelly (Miss Richards); Terry Doyle (Jack); Nicole Evans (Gail); Suzanne Cyr (Secretary); Heather Dick (Sarah's Mom); Martin Donlevy (Bartender); Richard Fitch (Guard); Colin Simpson (Dead Prom MC).

CREW: Norstar Entertainment Inc presents *Prom Night 3*. *Casting:* Media Casting, Lucinda Sill. *Production Designer:* Reuben Freed. *Music:* Paul Zaza. *Director of Photography:* Rhett Morita. *Written by:* Ron Oliver. *Produced by:* Ray Sager, Peter Simpson. *Directed by:* Ron Oliver, Peter Simpson. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A high school student named Alex (Conlon) really needs to apply himself to his studies if he hopes to become a doctor. Unexpectedly, his school work and athletic abilities are exponentially enhanced by the aid of an evil hot-totrot ghost, Mary Lou (Taylor), a former prom queen who died in 1957. Before long, Mary Lou is killing the competition, and Alex wishes he had a different girlfriend.

COMMENTARY: In terms of personal bias, I'm generally not much enamored with the campier of the 1990s horror films. Yet, oddly, *Prom Night 3: The Last Kiss* worked its unholy brand of magical seduction on me. The film, a *Fatal Attraction*- style "sexual haunting" by the evil BogeyLady Mary Lou Maloney is often darn funny, and directors Ron Oliver and Peter Simpson showcase a nice sense of imagination, especially in terms of their visuals.

Take for instance, Mary Lou's brand of personal hell. As the film opens, we see her trapped in the Devil's realm, in an apparently endless, low-energy musical number; a prom dance from Hell literally. No wonder she wants out.

Later, Mary Lou's prey, Alex (Conlon), is tortured in class by his unwanted "girlfriend" during a personal hygiene film in health class.

It's silly stuff, no doubt, but—in keeping with the new 1990s sense of self-reflexive horror films, at least it's *knowingly* silly. For instance, one character is told by an adult that he has "listened to too many rock albums and watched too many horror films." Many horror fans soon came to object to this type of post-modern "distancing" from the material as the decade went on, but *Prom Night 3: The Last Kiss* is pretty inoffensive and even charming on this front.

This sequel also fits with the franchise's history of constantly updating itself to fit current trends. The 1980 *Prom Night* was an old-school slasher, the 1987 *Hello Mary Lou: Prom Night 2* was a rubber-reality-styled effort from the heyday of Freddy, and now here comes *The Last Kiss*, positioning itself for the new decade by bridging the gap between cheesy humor and gory horror. Only the fourth film in the movement, a return to old school slasher conventions, defies this pattern.

In the decade of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the high school milieu would certainly seem to be played out, but *Prom Night 3: The Last Kiss* does a nice job with its teen leads, who despite adult cynicism and supernatural intervention set out to build a future for themselves. Given a choice between facing a draconian guidance counselor who advises Alex that the world needs "ditch-diggers" and the evil Mary Lou, I suspect many teens would pick Mary Lou.

Sure, she's got to "stop killing people" but at least Mary Lou seems 100 percent invested in her (supernatural) job.

Shakma *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christopher Atkins (Sam); Amanda Wyss (Tracy); Roddy McDowall (Sorenson); Ari Meyers (Kim); Robb Morris (Gary); Greg Flowers (Richard); Tre Laughlin (Bradley); Ann Kymberlie (Laura); Donna Jarrett (Brenda); Typhoon (Shakma).

CREW: A Hugh Parks Production. *CASTING:* Ashley Dale Michael. *MUSIC:* David C. Williams. *WRITTEN BY:* Roger Engle. *DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:* Andrew Bieber. *FILM EDITOR:* Mike Palma. *CO-DIRECTOR:* Tom Logan. *PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY:* Hugh Parks. *MPAA RATING:* R. *RUNNING TIME:* 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: At a metropolitan hospital, a research team led by Dr.

Sorenson (McDowall) tests aggressive responses in a surgically-altered baboon named Shakma (Typhoon). After surgery, the animal attacks a human and is scheduled for termination, but given the wrong injection. At the same time, the pre-med staff—including Sam (Atkins), Tracy (Wyss), Richard (Flowers), Bradley (Laughlin) and Gary (Morris)—play a live-action fantasy role-playing game in the mold of Dungeons & Dragons, with Sorenson as the "game master." While the young doctors-in-training search labs in the hospital for clues to rescue young Kim (Meyers), playing a princess in the contest, Shakma awakens and goes on a vicious murder spree on the fifth floor.

COMMENTARY: *Shakma*, a wild-monkey-on-the-loose movie in the style of the underrated *Link* (1987) or *Monkey Shines* (1988), is populated by the uncoolest, not to mention slackest medical students you've ever seen portrayed in a film. They botch the euthanasia of a dangerous baboon, flirt incessantly with one another, hardly seem to care about their "important" research, and spend their nights playing a dorky, computer-controlled version of Dungeons & Dragons replete with walkie talkies and nerdy nicknames like "Nemesis" and "Game master." A password in their game is "Frodo," and the only person they can get to play the role of their imperiled princess is an underage girl named Kim.

Grey's Anatomy this is not.

It isn't just that all the protagonists in *Shakma* are absent-minded dorks, it's that they are slow-moving, absent-minded dorks. Christopher Atkins, playing Sam, must be the most infuriatingly slow-witted and slow-moving hero in horror movie history. The movie is filled with sequences in which Captain Slow here slowly explores laboratories, peeks around corners, walks upstairs, boards elevators, hunts Shakma, and just kind of gazes about. In two emergency situations, he takes forever to get moving to help Tracy. And Sam's attempts to stop the rampaging animal are particularly laughable too. At one point, he arms himself with— *wait for it*— a strobe light.

That'll do it Sam. Just get back to skulking around, all right?

Alas, Sam even expires slowly, his final death throes stretched out beyond reason, beyond sanity. This is the movie's greatest flaw: *a slow personal tempo*. It features endless, repetitive sequences of characters bracing themselves against doors as Shakma attacks, exploring empty rooms, and generally just heading up and down corridors and stairwells. A good ten or fifteen minutes could have easily been cut from the film and *Shakma* not only would have been tighter, but a heck of a lot more suspenseful.

It's a shame the editor didn't prune a little more efficiently because the makers of *Shakma* have a great villain in their titular, poop-dropping baboon. There's almost no fakery involving this animal's wild antics, and the baboon very convincingly throws temper tantrum after temper tantrum in the film. It knocks over computer stands, hurls itself at walls at warp speed, leaps through the air, and—in one extended sequence—actually rips apart a science laboratory from top to bottom. This is one angry ape.

The downside of this "real" approach is that the apparently dangerous monkey is almost never seen in the same shot with the human actors. Thus, Muir's Rule of Proximity is violated: in animal attack movies, you must always feel that the humans are in spitting distance of the film's central, feral danger. Putting man and wild animal in the same frame on several occasions would have accomplished that in spades in *Shakma*, ramping up the threat level. For an example, see *Kingdom of the Spiders* (1977) which virtually douses star William Shatner in live spiders. For an opposite example, see *Frogs* (1972), in which star Ray Milland never even seems to be in the same movie with the vicious amphibians.

Despite the relative lack of interaction between actor and monkey, there's one authentically great composition in *Shakma*. In the foreground of one shot, we see Shakma's blood-dripping jaw looming large; in the background and distance, we see the horrified Tracy (Wyss) reacting. It's a very menacing image, and the movie needed more of them.

Other than that, it's like there are two movies here. A great B-movie cast, including Roddy McDowall, Amanda Wyss and Christopher Atkins, wanders hallways and laboratories *ad nauseum*, while in the other, more interesting movie, Shakma just angrily goes stark raving bonkers. We don't actually see much by way of attacks in the film either, but the aftermath is grisly: McDowall and Flowers play their final scenes without faces.

A more skilled director could have crafted a taut, terrifying film out of *Shakma*'s central situation featuring the same baboon. The key to editing a movie, I have learned, is to cut out all the dead weight, and bring the good stuff closer together. At eighty or eighty-five minutes, *Shakma* might have been a decent exploitation movie with a real sense of thrills. Instead, at 100 minutes, it's absolutely dire, with endless scenes of "exploring" interfering with the generation of tension.

By the time Atkins gets down to business and tries to electrocute Shakma (Shock ma?), all the film's narrative momentum has bled

away. Audiences will find *Shakma* unforgivably boring and worse, even rooting for the red-assed ape to just get it over with and finish off these annoying, indulged pre-med students.

Sorority House Massacre 2 .

Cast and Crew

CAST: Robyn Harris (Linda); Melissa Moore (Jessica); Stacia Zhivago (Kimberly); Michelle Verran (Barbii); Dana Bentley (Janey); Jurgen Baum (Lt. Block); Karen Chorak (Sgt. Shawlee); Mike Elliott (Eddie); Bridget Carney (Candy); Bob Sheridan (Moving Man); Eric Hoffman (Bartender); Carlo Jonzi (Abdul); Hassan Feffer (Schmabdul); Emil Rochelle (Godfather); Shannon Wilsey (Satana); Alex Tabrizi (Bouncer); Kevin Tent (Newscaster); James B. Rogers (Cop); Orville Ketchum (Himself).

CREW: *Music:* Chuck Cirino. *Production Designer:* Richard K. Wright. *Visual Effects:* Dean and William Jones. *Directors of Photography:* J.E. Bush, Jurgen Baun. *Film Editor:* Neenca S. Eisenstein. *Executive Producer:* Roger Corman. *Produced by:* Shelly Stoker. *Written by:* Mark McGee, J.B. Rogers, Bob Sheridan. *Directed by:* Jim Wynorski.

SYNOPSIS: Five years after a man named Hoch -stedder killed his entire family there, a group of buxom sorority girls purchases his old house and start to fix it up. After the sorority sisters play with a Ouija Board, a killer—possibly creepy next door neighbor Orville Ketchum—begins to murder them.

COMMENTARY: Horror fandom is a big tent, to appropriate a descriptor from the Republican Party, circa 2008. In that Big Horror Tent, you will find fans of Universal Horrors, Hammer Films, Italian horrors, Godzilla, fans of the Savage Cinema and more.

Allegedly, there are even those fans— *though I have never encountered them personally, in five years of horror blogging and ten years of writing books in the genre and attending conventions*— who apparently just like to ogle untalented women with big breasts and watch them get murdered by vicious psychos.

Again, in what I consider a relatively wide experience, I've never met anyone who's spoken up in favor of such films, or championed

them. "Yeah, I really like movies like *Sorority House Massacre 2*. You know: movies with big titties, bad acting and lots of blood."

But still, these people must exist: how else to explain a lecherous, lousy movie like this one? Someone *somewhere* must be sure there's an audience for a movie pitched so low that it could practically slip beneath the floor boards. Julie Corman was the producer of *Sorority House Massacre 2*, but she's credited here as Shelly Stoker, which should probably tell you something about the level of pride the filmmakers had for their project.

Frankly, I wouldn't want to be associated with this movie, either.

Again, in horror we should all tolerate each other's tastes and guilty pleasures, I suppose, but this is the kind of movie that only serves one end. It gives the horror genre a bad name with mainstream reviewers, and is even lampooned by *Scream* (1996).

You remember don't you? There's that Neve Campbell line about "big-breasted women who can't act?" She might as well have been talking about every cast member in this movie.

In *Sorority House Massacre 2*, there's even an insulting disclaimer: "No girls were actually hurt or mistreated during the making of the film."

On the surface, that might seem like someone's idea of wit. It might even seem harmless at first blush. But just think about it for a minute. *Really* think about it. It's poking fun at itself, sure. But it's also, at least implicitly, comparing women to, you know, horses, pigs and other animals you see wrangled in the movies.

Well, I guess it's easier to see them murdered if we don't think of them as fully human.

My bias here arises not from feminism, liberalism or any other "ism" I might get clobbered with in response to this review, but simply from the fact that I don't like to have stupidity foisted upon me.

And certainly not in a genre that, at its best, bravely asks questions about the nature of our human existence. *The Exorcist* asks us to consider the structure of the universe, and if there is such a thing as good and evil. *The Last House on the Left* (1972) asks whether violence solves problems, or if it just makes "the castle stay the same." *The Ring* (2002) comments on the mass suffering portrayed in modern media and the impact of that transmitted suffering on the community that watches.

These and other horror films examples are the furthest thing from stupid or pandering. They may be violent, raw and decorum-

shattering, but they don't ask us to embrace a caveman, knuckle dragging view of one half-of-the human species: as bikini-wearing nincompoops who will strip down and take a shower ... even when there's no warm water available and a serial killer may be on the premises.

These movies don't suggest that these augmented, breasty-things called "Fe-males" will walk about in each other's company completely topless, even though a peeping tom neighbor, Orville Ketchum, is on the loose.

There are always going to be rabid rightwing fundamentalists out to censor horror films, and as long as movies like *Sorority House Massacre 2* get made, they're going to have some success in that jihad. And I hate that. Why give the enemy ammunition if you don't need to?

The technical credits of *Sorority House Massacre 2* are pretty much as you might expect:

lousy. Cue the stock lightning footage, and we're off to the incompetent races. Twice, you can see a hose that's used to spray blood on the actresses during the death scenes slip into shot. First time, the hose shows up in the kitchen. The next time, it's in the attic. A clever editor might have found a way not to include these shots, but *Sorority House Massacre 2* has no regard or respect for its audience, which it assumes, I guess, are titstarved, drooling adolescent boys who live in their parents' basement.

Again, I've never encountered a single person in horror fandom who fits that description, or who admitted to really, really liking movies such as this one.

You know why? Here's the dirty little secret: *Sorority House Massacre 2* wasn't made for horror fans. It was made for Neanderthals. Only instead of big clubs, they carry remote controls.

Preferably ones with the "pause" button spelled out in big letters.

Soultaker * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Joe Estevez (The Man/Soultaker); Vivian Schilling (Natalie McMillan); Greg Thomsen (Zach Taylor); Robert Z-Dar (Angel of Death); David Shark (Brad); Jean Reiner (Anna McMillan); Chuck

Williams (Tommy Marcetto); David Fawcett (Mayor Grant McMillan); Gary Kohler (Sgt. Haggerty); Dave Scott (Officer Mal); Peter Dach (Store Clerk); Cinda Lou Freeman (Candice); Meschelle Manley (Karen); Charles Bosworth (Mr. Taylor); Jeff Deen (Dr. Reiner).

CREW: Park-Schilling Productions and Victory Pictures present a Michael Rissi film. *Castings:* Mary Gaffney, Daniel Travis. *Director of Photography:* James Rosenthal. *Music:* Jon McCallum. *Costume Designer:* Sylvia Lawrence. *Film Editors:* Jason Coleman, Michael Rissi. *Executive Producers:* Dennis J. Carlo, Charles Luria, Ivor Royston. *Produced by:* Connie Kingrey, Eric Parkinson. *Written by:* Vivian Schilling. *Story by:* Vivian Schilling and Eric Parkinson. *Directed by:* Michael Rissi. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 94 minutes.

P.O.V.: "The script was intriguing because it was an opportunity to do a film that dealt with life after death. This was before *Ghost* and *Flatliners* (were released).... The idea of doing a film dealing with a parallel universe interested me."⁸—Director Michael Rissi describes *Soultaker*.

SYNOPSIS: Star-crossed lovers Natalie (Schilling) and Zach (Thomsen) nearly die in a car wreck after Summer Fest because Zach's jealous friend Brad (Shark) has been using cocaine. A "soultaker" (Estevez) comes to claim the souls of all those involved in the accident, but because of a time/space displacement, Natalie and Zach are still alive, after a fashion. Now they must race to the hospital before doctors can take their bodies off life support. At the same time, they must evade the Soultaker, a creature who seems to have a special affection for Natalie.

COMMENTARY: Michael Rissi's *Soultaker* certainly has a bizarre history. Shot in Mobile, Alabama, on a budget of \$250,000, the film was released theatrically to accolades (from *Variety*, especially) and even considerable profits. In 1991, the film also won a Saturn Award from the esteemed Academy of Science Fiction Fantasy and Horror for "Best Video of the Year." It was highlighted as a Sci-Fi Channel "Planetary Premiere" in the years following that honor.

Then, in 1998, *Mystery Science Theater 3000* re-cut *Soultaker*, removing entire sequences from the film, and proceeded to riff through the entire picture. It was a funny, funny episode of the beloved, much-honored program, but the results and ramifications weren't exactly happy for *Soultaker*. A film that had previously been well-received (and, yes, well-reviewed!) by many organizations dropped like a stone to the Bottom 100 on the Internet Movie Database and became essentially a laughing stock ... just because it

had been on *MST3K* and, well, *MST3K* was known for featuring "bad movies."

I'm a huge fan of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, but certainly, in the case of *Soultaker*, Mike, Crow and Tom Servo didn't do the movie any favors. *Soultaker* is by no means a great (or even particularly good) film; nevertheless, it doesn't belong in the "worst movie of all-time" cellar with the likes of *Manos: The Hands of Fate* (1966) and *Monster-A-Go-Go* (1965). And, in fact, the director is right to point to other 1990 releases such as *Ghost* and *Flatliners*, which have much in common thematically with the very low-budget, but not entirely unresourceful *Soultaker*.

In all these supernatural horror films, there is an explicit renunciation of the "Greed is Good" aesthetic of the 1980s (to quote *Wall Street* [1987] character Gordon Gekko). Instead, these three films suggest that immoral activity in this life has terrible repercussions in the next. In *Soultaker*, those who commit crimes or do terrible things are punished in the after-life and made to serve as "Soultakers." This is the fate of "The Man," Joe Estevez's character, who discovered his wife's in-fidelity and murdered her. Now, he flashes back to his powerful love for her (in sepia-tone) and mourns what his act of impulsive passion stole from him: his soul's eternal rest.

This is also the fate of Brad, Zach's druggie friend, who is responsible for the car accident that kills Candice and imperils the others. Late in the film, Brad returns to the mortal coil as a Soultaker, essentially performing the karmic equivalent of community service. He tells Brad that Led Zeppelin lied, that there is "no Stairway to Heaven."

While the specific expression of this idea may be easy to laugh at, Brad's admission is earnest and heartfelt: he is kept in the dark about the nature of the universe, about the nature of existence, paying penance for his bad deeds for all eternity. If we reflect on Lucifer's punishment—facing the absence of God's light in his life for all time—we can begin to understand the pain of "The Man" and Brad here.

Like *Ghost* and *Flatliners*, *Soultaker* suggests, indeed, a universal hierarchy right outside our breadth of vision. In *Ghost*, there are Soultakers of sorts, dragging souls down to Hell. In *Flatliners*, our moral wrongs are literally made manifest to confront us. *Soultaker's* version is the cheesiest interpretation of this 1990s "moral rebound," as I like to term it, but we ought not to forget that *Soultaker* also had far fewer resources with which to work.

Still, Robert Z'Dar and Joe Estevez don't truly embody the sense of menace the movie seems to require of them. Z'Dar seems too

interested in human concerns (he is legitimately curious when "The Man" tells him that Vivian reminds him of someone) and simultaneously the holder of information we should know more about (like the rules of time and space which allow Zach and Natalie to escape death). Estevez does well with the pathos in his role. He does not seem particularly scary or imposing in terms of physicality or demeanor.

It is indeed easy to laugh at all the late 1980s– style mullets in *Soultaker*. It's easy to deride the film because it can't count on special effects to pull it through some weird, silly moments. It's fun to laugh at the apparent egotism of Vivian Schilling, both writing the screenplay and starring in the film (and yes, she does resemble Tonya Harding's doppelganger). But in this case, all that humor—though funny—glosses over the very things *Soultaker* accomplishes well, given its restrictions. In the uncut, non– *Mystery Science Theater* version, there's a degree of suspense and more than a touch of the 1990 "morality rebound" that had seeped into the genre.

Again, no one is arguing *Soultaker* is high art. Or that it doesn't appear to be an uncredited semi-remake of *Carnival of Souls*, right down to the car accident and personification of death. It's just that it isn't the pinnacle of movie crap either. Frankly, there are a lot of horror movies in the 1990s that are a lot worse. But—lucky for *Sorority House Massacre 2*, *Syngenor*, *Zombie Bloodbath* and the rest—they didn't go through the soulrobbing experience of appearing on a beloved "Bad Movie"–riff series.

So to use a 1990s term, let me have a Sister Souljah moment here. Although I love and admire *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, it seems appropriate and fair that the makers of the program should have acknowledged that in order to make their running time, they cut up this particular "bad" film and made it significantly worse in the process. Good for *MST3K*. Good for a laugh. Not so good for *Soultaker*.

Syngenor * (DTV)

Cast and Crew

CAST: Starr Andreef (Susan Valentine); Mitchell Laurance (Nick Cary); David Gale (Carter Brown); Charles Lucia (Stan Armbrewster); Riva Spier (Paul Gorski); Jeff Doucette (David Greenwait); Bill Gratton (Lt. Leo Rosselli); Lewis Arquette (Ethan Valentine); Jon Korkes (Tim

Calhoun); Melanie Shatner (Bonnie Brown); Ken Zavayna (Sam Rebs); Roy Fegan (Donnie); Julie Kris (Candy); Kate Romero (Brandy); Christopher Burgard (Scott).

CREW: *Executive Producer:* Marcel R. Elnjian. *Casting:* Cathy Henderson. *Music:* Thomas Chase, Steve Rucker. *Production Designer:* R. Clifford Searcy. *Director of Photography:* James Mathers. *Produced by:* Jack F. Murphy. *Written by:* Michael Carmody, Brent V. Friedman. *Directed by:* George Elanjian, Jr. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Syngenor, a synthesized (artificially created) life form is released from cold storage by its makers at Norton-Cyberdyne and begins killing employees of the company, including kindly old Ethan Valentine (Arquette). Ethan's niece Susan (Andreef) and investigative reporter Nick Cary (Laurance) look into the situation and realize that loony CEO Carter Brown (Gale) is creating these monsters as weapons for the U.S. military.

COMMENTARY: *Syngenor* is a sequel to 1981's *Scared to Death*. Both films feature the same slimy monster, but beyond that the connection between films is pretty loose. For instance, in the earlier film, the creature thrived in the drippy sewers beneath Los Angeles. Here, conversely, water has a devastating effect on the monster, so something has changed.

If continuity is ragged between pictures, however, one thing is for certain. Though not great by any definition, *Scared to Death* was still much better than this underwhelming, self-indulgent and incoherent effort.

Here, the Syngenor is improbably kept on ice in a very prominent basement refrigerator. Apparently, this is handy since it is called upon occasionally to do Norton-Cyberdyne's dirty work ... meaning the murder of would-be whistle-blowers. Meanwhile, office politics are just as cutthroat and back-stabbing in the upper levels of the corporation, a statement about Big Business and the nature of monsters.

Apparently a "leading supplier of wartime paraphernalia," Norton-Cyberdyne plans to market the inhuman, drooling, fanged Syngenors as super-soldiers of the future as part of its "Dark Skies Project." Conveniently, it also plans to market a sort of death-ray/death-rattle device which can kill the beast. The heroes eventually use the super weapon to kill the super soldiers.

Syngenor is predictable, goofy and highly imitative of James Cameron's *Aliens*, right down to a chase sequence set in a vent shaft. The costumes are ridiculous too, and I don't just mean the rubbery man-in-suit, *Syngenor*. Why, for instance, do company security personnel wear purple jumpsuits with silver epaulets? That's hardly business-casual. And if you were CEO would you really want to draw attention to the fact that your business is outfitted with a Gestapo-style security force?

In fairness, *Syngenor* is occasionally funny, particularly during an educational film showing the monsters driving U.S. Army jeeps and improbably performing other soldierly duties, but it is never particularly smart. David Gale goes way over the top in his performance as the CEO, at one point donning rabbit ears. "Where's the applause?" he asks while wearing 'em.

Listen for the sound of one hand clapping, Dave.

***Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* * ***

Critical Reception

"None of the texts make sense, none of the participants make ingratiating company, and the reasoning behind the final, most spectacular yarn is conclusively impenetrable."—Philip Strick, *Sight and Sound Film Review*, Volume: May 1991–April 1992, BFI Publishing, page 238

"Special appearances by Debbie Harry, William Hickey, Julianne Moore, Steve Buscemi and Christian Slater aren't enough to save this mediocre attempt at a horror anthology film. Much like the '80s TV show that spawned it, this one has not aged all that well."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: "Wraparound Story": Deborah Harry (Betty); David Forrester (Priest); Matthew Lawrence (Timmy); "Lot 249": Christian Slater (Andy); Robert Sedgwick (Lee); Steve Buscemi (Bellingham); Julianne Moore (Susan); "Cat from Hell": David Johansen (Halston); William Hickey (Drogan); Alice Drummond (Carolyn); Delores Sutton

(Amanda); Mark Margolis (Gage); "Lover's Vow": James Remar (Preston); Ashton Wise (Jer); Philip Lenkowsky (Maddox); Robert Klein (Wyatt); Rae Dawn Chong (Carola); Nicole Leach (Margaret); Daniel Harrison (John).

CREW: Paramount Pictures presents a Richard P. Rubinstein Production. *Casting:* Julie Mossberg, Brian Chavanne. *Make-up Effects Consultant:* Dick Smith. *Special Effects Make-up:* KNB EFX Group. *Film Editor:* Harry B. Miller III. *Production Designer:* Ruth Ammon. *Director of Photography:* Robert Draper. *Co-Producer:* David R. Kappes. *Produced by:* Richard P. Rubinstein. *"Lot 249" inspired by a story by:* Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. *"Cat from Hell" based on a story by:* Stephen King, *screenplay by:* George Romero. *"Lover's Vow" by:* Michael McDowell. *Directed by:* John Harrison. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A well-to-do house frau and canni -bal Betty (Harry) prepares for a dinner party where the main course is a young boy, Timmy (Lawrence). To pass the time till he is to be cooked in the oven, Timmy reads from her favorite book as a child: *Tales from the Darkside*. In the first story, "Lot 249," a college student named Bellingham (Buscemi) who has been cheated out of a scholarship by a frat-boy sends a Mummy to exact deadly revenge. In the second tale, "Cat from Hell," an old man in a wheelchair, Droган (Hickey), hires a hit man to kill a murderous, seemingly immortal cat. In the last tale, "Lover's Vow," a starving artist encounters a gargoyle in a dark alley and it makes him promise never to speak its name or refer to it again. The artist keeps his promise and then in short order meets a beautiful woman (Chong) who brings him fame and fortune. Sometime later, he becomes anxious to confide his secret.

COMMENTARY: The syndicated TV horror anthology *Tales from the Darkside* (1984–1988) ran for four years in American syndication, airing eighty-nine episodes in over 125 major markets before being replaced by a similar Laurel-produced anthology, *Monsters* (1988–1991).

A four year run was no small accomplishment, either, given that each half-hour episode of *Tales from the Darkside* only cost \$100,000 per episode to produce (with a rumored \$188.00 per episode spent on special effects).

Given such financial concerns, economical filmmaking and good writing from the likes of Stephen King, Robert Bloch, Ron Goulart, Frederic Brown, David Gerrold, Clive Baker, and George Romero carried the day and made the TV series a hit with horror fans and general audiences. Without a high budget, the series thrived on solid

dramatic foundations like wit, characterization and intelligence.

The 1990 feature adaptation of *Tales from the Darkside* finds those qualities in relatively short supply. The movie features strong special effects, good production design, and is carried by wellknown names such as Christian Slater, Steve Buscemi and William Hickey.



Guess who's coming to dinner? Deborah Harry (foreground) prepares a meal, while her primary ingredient—a young boy (Mathew Lawrence)—watches, in *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* (1990).

Yet the movie somehow fails to re-capture the ingenious, inventive and subversive tenor of the program on which it is based. This may be simply because, originally, the movie was to be called *Creepshow 3*, but the failure of the 1987 anthology *Creepshow 2* scuttled the franchise brand name. *Tales from the Darkside* was considered a more bankable name, and the rest is history, as they say. But facts are facts: these macabre ventures do not feel like typical *Darkside* stories. They lack the deeper meaning, social commentary and sense of overwhelming dread that many TV episodes highlighted.

The anthology's first tale, "Lot 249," is essentially *Creepshow 2*'s Old Chief Woodenhead, only re-done with a Mummy as the avenging angel. This segment may actually be the strongest featured in the film, as it plays for a while a bit like a yuppie-era black comedy, especially with the sardonic Slater on-screen, pursuing his avaricious agenda like a young Jack Nicholson.

There's some nice film grammar composition here too: one amazing shot reveals Andy traveling down a staircase on the right side of the frame, while the Mummy lumbers up the stairs in the left-side. One character is on the rise, the other heading down to his demise.

Though visually-skilled and written with a fond eye towards the genre (especially with the mention of a Zuni fetish doll), "Lot 249" is still your basic "cosmic scales of justice" righted story in which a supernatural agent makes certain that justice is wrought. But there's something callow about the enterprise, some quality that, again, just doesn't feel like it shares much with the TV show.

Still, there's a creepy unsettled feeling generated during this story at times, especially in the Mummy's brand of personal destruction. After the Mummy grabs his victims, he tugs their brains out through their noses with a wire-hanger. This is an image you're not likely to forget, and the movie provokes nightmares by showcasing the chunky, bloody hangers.

"Cat from Hell" also bears visual flourish, particularly in its icy blue flashbacks. Thematically, however, it is a total retread of the first tale, concerning a cat wreaking revenge for his breed against a man who has overseen the death of 5,000 felines to test a new medicine, "Compound G." The totality of the story is a one-on-one battle between a thug and another supernatural agent, in this case a cat, and it tends towards dullness.



A college student (Christian Slater, right), has no idea what's waiting for him around the next corner in *Tales from*

"Cat from Hell" also features a cat attacking the hit man's privates, and finally—and improbably—cramming himself down an unwitting victim's throat. The special effects depicting the cat-in-the-mouth (as opposed to a cat in the brain) are pretty terrible. It looks like someone swallowed a muppet. In all, this story plays like a one-note joke played out in over-long fashion.

The third and final segment of *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* is called "Lover's Vow" and it involves a Faustian bargain. A struggling artist finds fame, love and material wealth after encountering a gargoyle in a dark alley and promising never to discuss the monster with anyone else. He breaks that promise eventually and loses everything he holds dear. This story makes not even a modicum of logical sense, however, since the artist (James Remar) is never explicitly told that his continued silence is the very thing that pays for his lifestyle and family. He just thinks his life is what's at stake, not his family's life.

Tales from the Darkside: The Movie is diverting enough, but if you're a dedicated fan of the TV series, you can probably name many episodic installments that are better, more original and far more frightening than the middling stories highlighted here.

I can name a few for the record: "Seasons of Belief" (concerning a purportedly make-believe monster called a Grither who attacks naughty boys and girls on Christmas Eve), "The Milkman Cometh" (about a man who makes two wishes from a mysterious, unseen neighborhood Milkman), and "Distant Signals," which concerns aliens hoping to revive a long-cancelled TV series here on Earth, called *Max Paradise* (and starring Darren McGavin!).

"Answer Me" and Tom Savini's "Inside the Closet" are two additional examples of *Tales from the Darkside* at its best, and not one of these aforementioned tales features the hackneyed "just deserts" storyline repeated twice in the film.

Like many horror films of the 1990s, *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* looks good, sounds good and is eminently watchable once, but there's nothing very memorable or distinctive to hold onto once the final credits have rolled. It's just sort of ... undistinguished. The meal that Deborah Harry finally serves up for the audience is pretty bland.

" *Tremors* is a delightful throwback to such '50s and '60s films as *Them*, *The Deadly Mantis* and *Attacks* of both *The Giant Leeches* and *The Crab Monsters*. Like those genre films, *Tremors* is less focused on its oversized monsters—in this case, 30-foot-long hydra-headed carnivorous worms with a penchant for sucking people underground—than on their potential victims, and how these people react to attacks by unknown, and previously unimaginable, creatures."—Richard Harrington, *The Washington Post*, January 22, 1990

"Giddily senseless throwback to B-budget sci-fi-action films of the 1950s, now with a large enough budget for fine special effects."—Douglas Brode, *Boys and Toys: Ultimate Adventure Movies*, Citadel Press Books, 2003, page 257

"This film is fun across the board, with the sensibility of one of those fine old 1970s made-for-TV horror films. The lead actors keep the action and the humor going nicely and the action scenes work very well. Compare this movie to *Jurassic Park* and see what a hungry director can do with a fraction of the money."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kevin Bacon (Valentine "Val" McKee); Fred Ward (Earl); Finn Carter (Rhonda); Michael Gross (Burt); Victor Wong (Walter Chang); Reba McEntire (Heather); Bibi Besch (Megan).

CREW: Universal Studios Presents a No Frills/ Wilson-Maddock Production. *Casting:* Pam Dixon. *Music:* Ernest Troot. *Film Editor:* O. Nicholas Brown. *Production Designer:* Ivo Cristante. *Director of Photography:* Alexander Gruzynski. *Executive Producer:* Gale Anne Hurd. *Story by:* S.S. Wilson, Brent Maddock and Ron Underwood. *Produced and written by:* S.S. Wilson and Brent Maddock. *Directed by:* Ron Underwood. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two no account handymen, Val (Bacon) and Earl (Ward), decide to leave the small desert town of Perfection behind on the very day that an unknown breed of burrowing monsters, soon named "graboids," lays siege to the area. Val and Earl team-up with Rhonda

(Carter), a pretty seismology student and the local survivalist couple (Gross, McEntire) to fight the giant creatures which tunnel through soil and respond to sound. The survivors of the attack hold up in Walter Chang's grocery store until the monsters start searching for ways in...

COMMENTARY: *Tremors* is an affectionate, funny and exciting effort that pays tribute to a specific 1950s tradition in Hollywood: the desert horror picture. Legendary horror movie director Jack Arnold (1916–1992), who himself professed no great love for the desert, often crafted films in this creepy, arid locale because he felt deserts represented both loneliness (or isolation) and a sense of foreboding otherworldliness. There is just something eerie about them.

In films such as *It Came from Outer Space* (1953) and *Tarantula* (1955), Arnold depicted strange creatures invading American towns carved out of inhospitable desert wasteland, like Sand Rock, Arizona. Accordingly, *Tremors* sets its monstrous action in the ironically-named town of Perfection, a geographically isolated, economically ravaged outcropping of civilization.

The terror starts slowly in *Tremors* as two handymen, Val (Bacon) and Earl (Ward), discover the tip of a mystery on an electric pole. A local named Edgar Weems has died half-way up the pole, apparently afraid to come down. He was so terrified that he died of starvation, meaning that something malevolent on the ground waited him out.

Visually, the shot of the dead man on the telephone pole evokes a classic sequence in *It Came from Outer Space*, wherein a telephone repair man named George asks Johnny Putnam (star Richard Carlson) to listen to strange sounds coming across the wires on a similar pole. "Sometimes you think the wind gets in the wire and talks," Frank notes, describing the mysteries of the desert ... and a mystery from "the beyond" too.



The graboids are coming! Rhonda (Finn Carter) holds on for dear life in *Tremors* (1990).

In both *Tremors* and *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), the terror starts in the desert on the perimeter of human contact, at a technological marker (telephone poles) carrying the vanguard of "civilization"—communication itself—to isolated locales.

Next, Val and Earl come across a local farm that has also been the site of an attack by graboid. The exploration of such a scene invokes the memory of a non-Arnold desert movie, *Them!* (1954). There, two patrolmen came upon the ruins of a general store following an attack by gigantic ants.

More to the point, giant monster movies of this type (*The Giant Spider Invasion* [1975] for instance) often feature an early scene during which livestock are found dead—early victims of the movie monster. That occurs here and the cliché is even parodied in *Mosquito*, the mock desert monster movie from *Popcorn* (1991).

Val and Earl also meet Rhoda in short order, a female scientist investigating geological phenomena in the area, and, well, attractive lady scientists have long been the purview of giant monster movies (including *Night of the Lepus* [1972] with Janet Leigh and the aforementioned *Giant Spider Invasion*).

The desert location, the lady scientist who brings concrete knowledge of the monster's behavior patterns and even the death of the local livestock are familiar elements for films of this type, but *Tremors* has quite a few tricks up its sleeves. In classic monster movies, the creatures are combated by FBI agents and policemen, basically symbols of authority, respect and intelligence. In *Tremors*, the graboid monsters are combated by blue-collar "dudes" Val and

Earl, men who can't plan as far as the end of the week, let alone come up with a functional strategy against subterranean giant worms. They are aided by two gun-happy survivalists, also unconventional protagonists.

Even more interestingly, *Tremors* removes the 1950s creative context for creatures like the graboids. In most films of that era, the monsters were either from another planet or the direct result of atomic testing and science gone amok. In *Tremors*, there is no origin for these monsters. They are here, they are fear, and nobody knows where they came from or why they came. Twists such as this pull the rug out from under viewers, who expect the re-assertion of certain clichés ... which doesn't happen.

Even more commendably, the film literally pulls out the carpet from under the characters. Because the creatures hunt under the surface, the ground itself is off-limits. It's fascinating to watch how the always-learning Val and Earl react to this handicap, and the film plays fair with the rules of the vibration-hunting monsters.

It's easy to call *Tremors* a tongue-in-cheek horror film, but that's not quite true. The film evidences a sense of joy about itself and its characters, but everyone speaks authentically in the spirit of the moment, showing some fear and not cracking jokes. That doesn't mean it isn't funny. Only that it's not campy. Director Underwood seems to understand exactly when to accent the humor and when to reach for the horror.

One of the film's major set-pieces is a bona fide classic. Val, Earl and Rhonda become trapped on residual rocks in the middle of the desert, unable to reach their truck some meters away. Rhonda comes up with the idea of pole vaulting from one rock to the next with metal sticks she uses in her works, in hopes of reaching the parked truck.

At just the point that Val, Earl and Rhonda are all in mid-pole vault, Underwood cuts to an extreme long shot, so that the three humans— vaulting in unison—can be adequately captured in one frame. Without exaggeration, the image looks like the horror-survival equivalent of synchronized swimming. The long shot encourages our amusement and good humor, but again, it's not campy: it's inspired, and it is truthful to the situation at hand.

A sort of *Jaws* on land featuring fast-moving, burrowing monsters, *Tremors* adopts plenty of impressive, ground-level P.O.V. racing shots. These moments help grant the film a strong sense of momentum and urgency.

It may not be deep, it may not be deeply thoughtful, but *Tremors* is a joyful, complete, even life-affirming cinematic experience. It's a

monster movie that genuflects to the tradition's noble past and plays on the conventions of the form. It is well-acted, scary and damned funny.

LEGACY: A box office success, *Tremors* sparked a new horror franchise. Direct-to-video sequels followed in 1996 (*After Shocks*), 2001 (*Back to Perfection*) and 2004 (*The Legend Begins*). In 2003, the Sci-Fi Channel (before it became Sy Fy) broadcast a short-lived weekly program, *Tremors: The Series*.

Troll 2 1/2

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michael Stephenson (Joshua); George Hardy (Michael); Margo Prey (Diana); Connie McFarland (Holly); Robert Ormsby (Seth); Deborah Reed (Creedence); Jason Wright (Elliott); Darren Ewing (Arnold); Jason Steadman (Drew); David McConnell (Brent); Gary Carlson (Sheriff Freak); Don Packard (Drugstore Owner); Christina Reynolds (Cindy); Glenn Gerner (Peter) Michelle Abrams (Woods Tales Girl).

CREW: Film Mirage Presents *Troll 2*. *Art Director:* Max Slowing. *Costumes:* Laurie Gemser. *Associate Producers:* Brenda Norris, David Hills. *Make-up:* Maurizio Trani. *Director of Photography:* Giancarlo Ferrando. *Original Music Score:* Carla Maria Cordio. *Film Editor:* Vania Friends. *Story and Screenplay:* Drake Floyd. *Directed by:* Drake Floyd. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Young Josh (Stephenson) is often visited by the ghost of his grandpa, Seth (Ormsby), who once read him stories of goblins that he insisted were true. When Josh's family goes on an "exchange vacation" and switches houses with a farm family in rural Nilbog, Josh also comes to understand the truth behind the monsters. In Nilbog, his family is tempted to eat green sap that will turn them into goblin food, but Josh, with Grandpa's help, is bound and determined to save them. Soon, the whole town has turned against Josh's family and goblins are everywhere...

COMMENTARY: Thanks to *Best Worst Movie*, a 2009 documentary about its making, the Italian sequel-in-name-only *Troll 2* has recently become enshrined amongst bad film lovers as perhaps the worst film

ever made. I won't quibble with that assessment, especially since *Troll 2* fits the bill perfectly, proving both bafflingly stupid and startlingly inept.

For example, *Troll 2*'s intrepid director, "Drake Floyd" (Claudio Fragasso), has a difficult time reconciling dialogue in his script with the exigencies of principal photography. Upon arrival in the apparently deserted town of Nilbog in broad daylight, Josh's father helpfully announces that everybody is asleep "at this time of night."

Similarly, one character on the run urges another, "let's hide in this house," when he is clearly and obviously referring to a church, not a residence. A responsible filmmaker might have looped more accurate, less nonsensical dialogue into the scene during post-production, but not Fragasso.

Then, there's the fact that the director isn't such great shakes with consistency and believability. A ghostly hero in the film, Grandpa Seth, for instance, is capable of freezing time for thirty seconds at a stint yet is unable to find his way to the right bedroom in a small vacation house so as to chat with little Josh. He goes into sister Holly's room instead. "I've got to learn the layout of this house," he apologizes straight-faced.

Perhaps if he had frozen time he could have taken a quick tour...?

And how are viewers to reconcile that sometimes the Grandpa apparition is incorporeal and sometimes he is substantial, as in the case when he takes up a fire extinguisher?

As I watched *Troll 2* and kept seeing more and more ineptitude, I kept searching for some sign that it was a put-on, a comedy. But I didn't find it.

Not in the moment when Josh, in order to prevent his parents from eating contaminated food, urinates on the supper table.

Not in the love/seduction scene that strangely includes both corn on the cob and corn popping orgasmically into popcorn.

Not in the distinct lack of situational logic, such as the fact that Josh's family—one and all—is entirely willing to eat food laced with yucky green goo, whether a sandwich or the aforementioned corn.

And certainly not in the astoundingly bad goblin make-up and costuming either. *Troll 2*'s "monster" look consists of dwarves wearing burlap sacks, carrying sticks, and donning unexpressive masks that appear crudely carved out of wood.

The dialogue, too, is unintentionally hilarious. One friend

attempts to comfort another, who has been transformed into a plant, with the soothing words, "don't fret."

Another line of dialogue, one carrying the film's not-so-subtle anti-meat message, announces that a transformed character is now "one with the vegetable world," a remark that Fragasso may have been able to identify with in a personal sense.

Adding insult to injury, *Troll 2* boasts a longer running time than the original *Troll*, a veritable masterpiece by comparison and a movie that had the decency to be short.

The half-star rating here is awarded because, despite all the flaws, there's something goofily innocent and childish about the stupidity and lack of technique so brazenly highlighted by *Troll 2*.

I can't say that this is a good movie, or even a run-of-the-mill bad one. But by all means I recommend that you see it at least once. Sometimes being one with the vegetable kingdom is worth a laugh or too.

Just don't drink the green kool-aid...

January 12:

Congress passes a resolution authorizing President Bush to use force to liberate Kuwait, thus authorizing the first Gulf War.

January 16:

A female serial killer and prostitute, Aileen Wuornos, confesses to the murder of half-a-dozen men and is sentenced to death.

January 16:

Surgical air-strikes against Iraq are the first salvo of the U.S.'s "Operation Desert Storm" in the Gulf War. In the days ahead, Iraq responds by lobbing deadly Scud missiles at Israel.

February 7:

The ground phase of "Operation Desert Storm" commences.

February 26:

Saddam Hussein orders his soldiers to withdraw from Kuwait, but his loyalists burn the oil fields as they depart. For all intents and purposes, the Gulf War is over. By March 10, over 500,000 American troops have begun the long odyssey home.

March 3:

In Los Angeles, 25-year-old driver Rodney King, an African American, is pulled over for speeding and subsequently beaten by more than twenty police officers. The event is recorded on videotape by eyewitness George Holliday and eventually broadcast on CNN. After the attack, King is hospitalized with a shattered eye socket,

broken leg, and fractured cheekbone. The beating proves so vicious it also knocked some fillings loose from his teeth.

March 15:

Four LAPD officers involved in the Rodney King beating are indicted.

April 6:

Iraq accepts the U.N.'s terms of surrender.

April 17:

The Dow Jones Industrial Average goes above 3,000 for the first time in American history.

June 12:

Boris Yeltsin is elected president of Russia.

July 1:

The Warsaw Pact is dissolved.

July 22:

Boxer Mike Tyson is charged with the rape of eighteen-year-old Miss Black America beauty contestant Desiree Washington. He is convicted of the crime and handed a six-year-sentence.

July 22:

A serial killer from Wisconsin, Jeffrey Dahmer, is arrested for the murder of seventeen men.

August 13:

Supernintendo—the heir to the Nintendo Entertainment Systems—goes on the market in the United States, becoming the best-selling video game console of the early 1990s.

August 19:

Mikhail Gorbachev is imperiled during an attempted coup by hard-liners in the Soviet Union. In the days that follow, the Soviet Union collapses as Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldavia, Azerbaijan and other states declare independence. The Cold War is over.

October 11–15:

African American legal scholar Anita Hill charges Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas (also African American) with sexual harassment in hearings at the U.S. Senate. Thomas calls the confirmation hearings a "high-tech lynching." On October 15th, the U.S. Senate narrowly confirms Thomas to serve as Justice on the highest court of the land, 52–48.

November 5:

White Supremacist David Duke loses the Louisiana governor's race, even after winning a majority of white votes.

Alligator 2: The Mutation * 1/2

Cast and Crew

CAST: Joseph Bologna (David Hodges); Dee Wallace Stone (Christine Hodges); Richard Lynch (Hawk Hawkins); Woody Brown (Rich Harmon); Bill Daily (Mayor Anderson); Holly Gagnier (Sheri Anderson); Steve Railsback (Vincent Brown); Brock Peters (Chief Clarence Speed); Tim Eyster (J.J. Hodges); Voy Goric (Carmen); Buckley Norris (Doc); Julian Reyes (Rueben Ruiz); Kane Hodder (Billy Boy); Bill Anderson (Time Keeper).

CREW: A Brandon Chase, Group 1 Film. *Casting:* Al Onorato,

Jerrold Banks. *Production Designer*: George Costello. *Film Editor*: Marshall Harvey. *Director of Photography*: Joseph Mangine. *Music*: Jack Tillar. *Written by*: Curt Allen. *Produced by*: Brandon Chase. *Directed by*: Jon Hess. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two fishermen and three hobos have disappeared near Regent Park, and a cop named Hodges (Bologna) opens an investigation only to learn that a mutated, giant alligator living in the sewers is the culprit. With the help of a rookie cop, Harmon (Brown), the mayor's gorgeous daughter, Sheri (Gagnier), his biologist wife, Christine (Wallace-Stone), and a redneck gator hunter, Hawk Hawkins (Lynch), Hodges sets out to destroy the beast. Unfortunately, a greedy local land developer, Vincent Brown (Railsback), refuses to cancel a carnival on the lake at Regent Park, endangering the local populace.

COMMENTARY: The original *Alligator* (1980) was a sensational "revenge of nature" movie from director Lewis Teague, a horror movie with a sense of wit, style and thrills. By contrast, this pointless 1991 sequel is a dull, slow-moving affair that mindlessly repeats the original film's story (down to the presence of corrupt local officials), but which never engages the audience. Special effects seemingly haven't improved in eleven years, either. At times, the titular alligator looks like an obese and overstuffed pool float. One reviewer less generously referred to the monster as a floating turd.

You can't blame the actors for the low quality of the film. They do their best, and for the most part, deliver likeable and competent performances. *I Dream of Jeannie*'s Bill Daily portrays the weasely Mayor Anderson, and if I didn't know better, I'd claim he was doing a dead-on George Bush imitation, down to the wimpy demeanor and selection in eyeglasses. The film's lead, Bologna, is no Robert Forster but has a laidback, relatively charming screen persona that impresses. Ditto for the underrated Dee Wallace-Stone and Holly Gagnier who both give good performances.

The problem is the utterly pedestrian direction. There's no energy, drive or enthusiasm behind any of the set-ups or horror moments. It all feels rote. Even the film's climax is dull and ordinary, and works up not the slightest bit of interest, let alone terror. Main characters die horribly, like Lynch's Hawk Hawkins, and the audience

feels nothing.

Where Teague infused a relatively silly story with wit and imagination, and even knowingly mimicked *Jaws* in some crucial plot moments, director

Jon Hess just seems at a total loss. Or worse, he seems actually disinterested. *Alligator 2: The Mutation* just kind of lays there on the screen, awkwardly floundering on its back.

This movie takes forever to get going, and then when it finally does, it's hardly worth the trouble. Hodges finally blows away the alligator with a bazooka (after gunshots, six sticks of dynamite and a tranquilizer gun fail to get the job done), and you find yourself wondering why he didn't just request the bazooka from his superior, played by Brock Peters, in the first place. *Alligator 2* doesn't express any sense of menace or fear regarding this gator, either. Because of the underwhelming fashion in which the whole enterprise is filmed, the beast doesn't even look particularly large, or very mobile. One attack scene is particularly laughable. Richard Lynch, our expert gator tracker with a Southern draaaaaaawl, spots the gator for the first time and starts screaming like a girl. This is funny, first of all, because you wouldn't expect a seasoned gator hunter to fall to pieces quite so quickly and so thoroughly. And secondly, because when the movie cuts to the gator scaring Hawk it's just this smallish, regular old-gator swimming through the sewers, vaguely in his direction. Alarm provoking? *Certainly*. Dangerous? *Absolutely*? But scream-like-a-girl worthy?

Not in a million years.

Steve Railsback plays the movie's other villain, and he's actually far more reptilian than the offending alligator. He is hateful, murderous, obnoxious and tricky. But director Hess is so inept with his staging that he doesn't even remember to stretch out the moment during which Railsback's character, Vince Brown, gets eaten by the gator and comeuppance is delivered.

After all his villainy, audiences want to see this guy suffer a little, but *Alligator 2* just shows a little blood in the water, and then moves on rather quickly, hitting all the movie's narrative points, but doing absolutely nada with each of them. It's as if the movie doesn't understand its own script, except as a series of events that need to be filmed, then strung together.

Alligator 2 is a mutant indeed. Its heartbeat is missing.

Critical Reception

"In this nightmare classic by Edmund Elias Merhige, a godlike thing dies giving birth to a womanly thing, who gives birth to a quivering messiah thing; then the local villager things ravage and bury them, and the earth renews itself on their corpses. It's as if a druidical cult had re-enacted, for real, three Bible stories of creation, the Nativity and Jesus's torture and death on Golgotha—and some demented genius were there to film it. No names, no dialogue, no compromises, no exit. No apologies either, for *Begotten* is a spectacular one-of-a-kind (you wouldn't want there to be two), filmed in speckled chiaroscuro so that each image is a seductive mystery, a Rorschach for the adventurous eye."—Richard Corliss, *Time* magazine, "A Happy Birthday for the kids of Kane," Volume 137, Issue 19, May 13, 1991, page 69

"Personally, I find *Begotten* grotesquely pretentious, but no less grotesque, nor technically impressive and abstractly interesting for that. This metaphorical splatter film is something like *Night of the Living Dead* might have been imagined by Georges Rouault.... The movie seems to exist in an advanced state of decomposition."—J. Hoberman, *The Magic Hour: Film at Fin de Siècle*, Temple University Press, 2003, page 91

"A symbolically charged, hypnotically powerful work much beloved of Susan Sontag, the film is redolent of the surrealism of Luis Buñuel and early David Lynch—Lynch in particular, due to the evocation of the body as the source of horror and decay. The washed-out, grainy look with its empty, desolate landscapes, is comparable with the lingering hopelessness and physical desolation of Aleksandr Sokurov's work, and makes *Begotten* a film worth seeking out."—Yoram Allon, Del Cullen, Hannagh Patterson, *Contemporary Film Directors: A Wall Flower Critical Guide*, Wallflower Press, 2002, page 374

Cast and Crew

CAST: Brian Salzberg (God Killing Himself); Donna Dempsey

(Mother Earth); Stephen Charles Barry (Son of Earth); James Gandia, Daniel Harkins, Michael Phillips, Erik Slavin, Arthur Streeter, Adolfo Vargas Garfield White.

CREW: World Artists Presents a Complex Corporation Production, a film by E. Elias Merhige. *Director of Photography:* E. Elias Merhige. *Sound:* Evan Albain. *Art Director:* Harry Duggins. *Written, produced and directed by:* E. Elias Merhige. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 78 minutes.

P.O.V.: "Among other things, I was particularly interested in the idea that the actor becomes a kind of lighthouse at the limits of the world, able to look out over the black abyss and bring back qualities and visions that we would never ordinarily have access too.... The actual making of the film turned out to be an extraordinary, tribal, shamanic experience: it felt like we were acting out some sort of cosmological situation."⁹

SYNOPSIS: A bizarre story of creation, life, fertility and death is expressed in grainy black-and-white and told without benefit of dialogue. A Godlike being kills itself, but "Mother Earth" takes its seed and gives birth to a human-seeming son, who is then dragged away and abused by strange, robed natives. The "Son of Earth" creates life and food for these men and women in a kind of fertility rite, and the villagers then proceed to kill Mother Earth and her son. Life springs anew from their gravesite and the cycle of life and death continues.

COMMENTARY: If nothing else, E. Elias Merhige's *Begotten* serves as a powerful reminder that movies don't all have to be cut from the same cloth. Given the vision of an artist, a daring moving picture can eschew tradition, reject convention, and flout expectations.

Four years in the making, at a cost of \$33,000, this black-and-white independent movie, for instance, features no dialogue, doesn't explain its quixotic narrative, and fails even to comment lucidly on its setting. It is the medium of film reduced to blunt, genetic basics: virtually silent, with images of light and darkness *indistinct*, that viewers must interpret, and little attempt at contextualization. An

opening card provides a sole clue: "Like a flame burning away to darkness, life is flesh on bone convulsing above the ground."

Sometimes during *Begotten*, our eyes can only register the fundamentals of shape and shade. The photography is grainy, pixelized, dirty, deliberately obscuring, and the result is that the movie sows a sense of uncertainty. Because we have never seen anything like this before, anything seems possible. And in those possibilities, horror blooms, at least for a while.

What we do register in *Begotten* seems utterly concerned with suffering and brutality. *Begotten* thus resembles a subconscious nightmare made manifest, as though the Earth itself could "dream" and transmit to us, its wards, a chronicle of its long, ever-changing violent seasons.

Considering this almost prehistoric, primal shape, *Begotten* appears as though it has been recovered from the dawn of time itself, from the cradle of antiquity. Of course, film is a technology that wasn't invented in antiquity, but if it had been, one can imagine this is exactly what we would see. The images are powerful, as if imprinted on hard, unforgiving stone, not celluloid.

Begotten is indeed something of a Rorschach test, as Richard Corliss wrote in his review for *Time* magazine. It commendably encourages personal interpretation. The film opens at a ramshackle cabin in the woods, with a not-quite human thing cutting itself open with a razor and then giving birth to a female ... something.

This female then spends long minutes stroking herself in her nethers, and she seems to be wearing a mask as she self-impregnates. Soon her son is born and he's a horrifying abomination, gyrating and spasming on the ground as if undergoing unbelievable pain. He vomits a lot too. The son soon gets tugged away by barbarous villagers and the malformed soul is burned, beaten, buried, clubbed with a mallet and generally mistreated.

Our minds jump to the idea of man assiduously, painfully re-shaping the hard soil of Earth to gain a foothold and grow crops, to bring life. Is this how the Earth feels to be under our yoke? Are we torturing poor Gaia?

After some interval, cleansing water falls upon the Earth in the form of rain, and we hear bubbling water on the soundtrack. Flowers wilt in fast motion, but new stalks grow up in their place, visible in front of a distant horizon. Again, we think almost unconsciously of the seasons changing, of the Earth renewing herself, of creation/destruction/creation played out with quasihuman things as our lead characters. The film has been categorized as horror because it is

bloody, violent, deeply disturbing and quite a bit more than "surreal." In shorthand, it's *The Passion of the Malformed*, or perhaps *The Passion of Mother Nature*.

The central debate about *Begotten* is simply this: is it a work of art, or an overlong self-indulgent piece of tripe? The answer is complicated. It's probably a bit of both, to be brutally honest. The film is fascinating in presentation, and I'm surprised more filmmakers have not aped this visual approach, utilizing black-and-white reversal film, plus frame-by-frame re-photography (a lengthy process which took ten hours for each moment of film).

Beyond the distinctive, one-of-a-kind appearance of *Begotten*, however, the film is not entirely successful. Scenes go on and on, lingering far past the viewer's tolerance and breaking point, and since the film rebuffs attempts to even clearly "see" it, the overall effect is distancing.

If Merhige is playing with film as a medium of expression, and willing to eschew audience comforts such as dialogue, clarity, sound, plus conventional narrative and characterization, then there is simply no need for the movie to last nearly eighty minutes. Running time is a convention of the form too. *Begotten* could be substantively the same film at a half-hour length, or—pushing it—an hour. It would make a helluva short, in other words, while it is a hellish, hard-to-sit-through feature film.

Merhige removes so many comforts of traditional narratives in *Begotten*, but maintains the one thing that might make the film more palatable without sacrificing its theme or visualization. I don't know if this is sadistic, or just a miscalculation.

So I'm hedging on the film's star rating. *Begotten* is an experimental, one-of-a-kind cinematic experience. It is memorable, unique and features moments of incredible gore, and also of incredible, lasting power. I recommend you see it, particularly if you are interested in film history and film style, and if you are patient with the way that some artists break away from tradition and convention. I also recommend it if you are interested in horror, and, in particular, the way horror can be visualized.

Yet at eighty minutes, *Begotten* outstays its welcome and, as viewers, we long for a more human connection to the bizarre imagery. The characters are but symbols, and they suffer terribly, but we still want to understand more. But the movie shuts out understanding through its very unwatchability, its chosen form of transmission.

Watching eighty minutes of hard-to-see "symbols" tortured by other indistinct, hard-to-see "symbols" on a hard-to-make-out landscape

is not an artistic end in itself: we're clever enough to get *Begotten's* point in fifty minutes. Not all film has to be the same, it's true, and *Begotten* earns points because it is so original. But by the same token, there's no need to bludgeon audiences with that originality, either.

LEGACY: At the end of the nineties, *Begotten's* auteur Merhige directed the critically-acclaimed *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000), starring Willem Dafoe.

***Blood Massacre* * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: George Stover (Rizzo); Robin London (Liz Parker); James Di Angelo (Jimmy); Thomas Humes (Pauly); Lisa Defuso (Monica); Richard Ruxton (Howard Parker); Grace Stahl (Chrissy Parker); Anne Frith (Frances Parker); Herb Otter, Jr. (Detective McGuire); Lucille Jolle (Bonnie); Lucie Poirer (Bar Dancer); Ted Hakim (Vinnie); Barry Gold (Country Guy); Karl Lotter (Cop #2); Gerard Vanik (Mr. Winston); Mary Ann Pence (Waitress); Theresa Crain (Renter at End); Mary McFaul, Don Leifert (Video Clerks); Paul Wilson (Bartender); Joey P. (Radio Announcer); Howard Levine (Body in Trunk).

CREW: Don Dohler Entertainment presents a Don Dohler Film. *Pyrotechnic Effects:* Philip E. Lister. *Technical Assistants:* Sean Quinn, John Kinhart. *Sound Recording:* Frederic S. Berney, Dan Buehl, Philip E. Lister. *Executive Producer:* Howard S. Esbin. *Film Editor:* Don Dohler. *Make-up Effects:* John Cosentino, Don Dohler, Larry Schlechter, Chris Chrysler. *Music:* Danny Linck, Jon Christopher. *Lighting and Photography:* Chris Chrysler, Jeff Herzberger. *Written and produced by:* Barry Gold, Dan Buehl, Don Dohler. *Directed by:* Don Dohler. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 73 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of thugs, led by the crazy Vietnam vet Rizzo (Stover), rob a video store and end up killing a clerk. They flee to the country, but their car breaks down and they hijack lovely Liz Parker (London). She leads them to the family farmhouse, where a pretty art student, Bonnie (Jolle), has just begun renting space. Rizzo and his gang terrorize Liz, Bonnie and the Parker family until the Parkers

show their true, surprising colors. It turns out that they are flesh-eating ghouls who have a taste for violence as well as blood.

COMMENTARY: *Blood Massacre* features a great twist. It's a savage cinema effort showcasing unwashed thugs threatening horrible violence against a seemingly-nice, American family that lives in the country. Just reading that description one may conjure images of *Last House on the Left* (1972) or something like that. But the twist, of course, is that the unwashed thugs don't know what they're getting into. They have actually arrived at the home of a family of cannibals, who quickly set about murdering and filleting them.

Like I said, great twist.

Too bad nothing else in the movie is even remotely great. Instead, *Blood Massacre* is hobbled by poor sound, amateurish acting, diffident camera-work, a shot-on-video haze, and several moments that cross the line from being horrific to plain old disgusting. Case in point: the unsavory love scene between Rizzo (George Stover) and Liz. She cuts herself, and he obligingly licks the wound like a hungry dog in heat. It's just ... nasty.

Blood Massacre seems to have trouble with day/night issues too, since there's a terrifying night of violence, followed by a daytime chase through the woods. But daytime disappears in minutes and we're back to night again, lickety-split.

All the while, Rizzo—ostensibly our hero— attempts to stay alive by using his skills from Vietnam to fight back against the cannibals. He makes bombs out of home-made gunpowder and Maxwell House cans, for instance. This is fun to watch, except that the audience doesn't really have a horse in the race, so to speak. Rizzo is a few cards short of a full deck, and the cannibals are deceitful and evil. It almost doesn't matter who wins, so by the time the movie ends with the Parkers preparing their stew for the county fair, it's not even particularly interesting anymore.

Blood Massacre was made by director Don Dohler (1946–2006), a man who developed a cult following not just for his films like *The Alien Factor* (1977), but because he masterminded the original *Cinemagic Magazine*, before *Starlog* took it over in 1979. I admire Dohler's dedication to filmmaking, but more so, I wish he could have made this the equivalent of an *I Spit on Your Grave* or *Hills Have Eyes*. Instead, *Blood Massacre* is occasionally energetic, often gross, but mostly just really, really bad.

Body Parts * * 1/2

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jeff Fahey (Bill Chrushank); Lindsay Duncan (Dr. Webb); Zakes Mokae (Det. Sawchuk); Kim Delaney (Karen Chrushank); Peter Murniek (Mark Draper); Brad Dourif (Remo Lacey); Paul Benvictor (Ray Kolberg); Nathaniel Moreau (Bill J.); Sarah Campbell (Samantha); Lindsay Merrithew (Roger); John Walsh (Charley Fletcher).

CREW: Paramount Pictures presents a Frank Mancuso, Jr. *Production:* an Eric Red film. *Casting:* Fern Champion, Don Zuckerman *Music:* Loek Dikker. *Co-Producers:* Jack E. Freeman, Patricia Herskovic. *Costume Designer:* Lynda Kemp. *Associate Producer:* Michael Sheehy. *Film Editor:* Anthony Redman. *Production Designer:* Bill Brodie. *Director of Photography:* Theo Van Sande. *Executive Producer:* Michael MacDonald. *Screen story by:* Patricia Herskovic, Joyce Taylor. *Screenplay by:* Eric Red and Norman Snider. *Produced by:* Frank Mancuso, Jr. *Directed by:* Eric Red. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A diffident psychologist, Bill (Fahey), gets injured in a freak car accident and becomes the recipient of a transplanted arm in an experimental surgery masterminded by the glacial and mysterious Dr. Webb (Duncan). After a time, Bill begins experiencing hallucinations and flashes of extreme behavior. He learns that his arm's donor was a death row inmate named Charley Fletcher (Walsh), and that Fletcher was apparently executed for his crimes. As Bill investigates further, he discovers that Fletcher is not dead, and worse, is stealing back his missing appendages.

COMMENTARY: The paranoid and admittedly unsettling horror film *Body Parts* is half-inspired and half-absurd. The inspired part originates from the film's meditation on where, precisely, evil resides. Does it live in the soul? In the flesh? Or in our cells themselves?

The absurd part comes in because, quite simply, the movie wants

us to believe that individual evil (like the evil of a serial killer, for instance) can reside in a transplanted arm or leg. The problem is, we already know that those pieces, separated from the larger organism are just ... meat. They don't have consciousness or sentience.

As the movie's cold fish and evil scientist correctly suggests, "the psychological make-up of the donor is irrelevant." Indeed, didn't we give up the belief long ago that having another man's blood, heart, liver or, yes, arm, would turn us into that man? Apparently not. There's still what author Janice M. Irvine in *Disorders of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Modern American Sexology* refers to as "lingering, mythic apprehensions."¹⁰

Oliver Stone's *The Hand* (1981) much more successfully toyed with the idea of renegade, self-aware body parts by suggesting that the offending severed hand of the title might be a product of star Michael Caine's demented imagination. But in the relatively evolved year of 1991, to feature a story as anti-science and anti-rational as *Body Parts* seems bizarre and anachronistic. The movie, by its very nature, fits the trend of "science run amok" (irresponsible science creates a murderous problem that society needs to solve), but still, it is impossible to be mad at doctors for attempting to give accident victims new arms and legs. Transplant surgery isn't like cloning dinosaurs (*Jurassic Park*), artificially-enhancing the intelligence of gigantic white sharks (*Deep Blue Sea*), or building a virtual reality amalgamation of all the great serial killers in history (*Virtuosity*), you know?



Dr. Alice Webb (Lindsay Duncan, left) has given Bill (Jeff Fahey) a new—and evil—lease on life: the transplanted arm of a serial killer. Bill's wife, Karen (Kim Delaney), watches. From Eric Red's *Body Parts* (1991).

This problem established, *Body Parts* undeniably features an admirable and substantial brooding quality. Jeff Fahey—an actor remarkably adept at projecting a very authentic-seeming dark side—portrays a diffident psychologist who, after his arm transplant surgery, begins to act in increasingly anti-social fashion. His Bill sees flashes of violence in his head. He starts smoking, and even begins swearing at his kids. Interestingly, Bill's transplanted arm is also more adept in the bedroom department too (and good sex is thus associated with evil!), as he caresses his wife, Kim Delaney, with literally a more confident ... hand. A convict even suggests to Bill that "maybe you got a little demon inside you these days."



He wonders where evil lives. A close-up of Bill (Jeff Fahey) in *Body Parts*.

Throughout its run, *Body Parts* builds a good case that, like *The Hand*, these strange experiences and visions may all be in Bill's head. After all, Bill is a psychologist who is obsessed with violence to begin

with, even before his car accident. He lectures about the "psychological roots and wellsprings of human violence." He meditates on "what is it that makes a man or woman for that matter— who is normal in most respects—to lose control?" These are interesting questions, and so long as *Body Parts* orbits Bill's respective (perhaps damaged) psychology, the film succeeds to a moderate degree.

But when the movie gets to a revived killer running around and violently trying to re-assemble all of his spread-out body parts by actually ripping them off their new hosts, the movie squanders its brooding quality and becomes campy and over-the-top.

Some of the staging here is exaggerated and unbelievable too. For instance, Bill has several seconds (on the magnitude of thirty or forty, actually) to avoid the car accident that causes him to lose his arm, but he doesn't avoid it. And, more bizarrely, Bill is left awake during transplant surgery so that he actually sees his surgeon going to work on the arm donor with a whirring bone saw. Tactful, huh? Wouldn't trained medical staff anesthetize their patient before they start putting the saw to tender human flesh?

Ultimately, Bill survives in *Body Parts* not by controlling his own dark side, his own psychology, but by physically confronting the original donor, a serial killer. "I won it, fair and square," declares Bill triumphantly after the confrontation. That may be true, but that answer most certainly doesn't get at all to the interesting questions that *Body Parts* asks for much of its run. There's an interesting subplot here about how violence begets violence and about how violence separates people from society at large, but it isn't enunciated in a committed fashion.

Truthfully, this is a movie I have a love/hate affair with. The direction is atmospheric, the performances are strong, and the film feels really, really paranoid. But the transplant story is so nineteenth century.

Campfire Tales * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Campfire Segments: Gunnar Hansen (Ralph); Robin Roberts (Jason); Tres Holton (Billy); Courtney Ballard (Danny); "The Hook": Lora Podell (Susan); H. Ray York (The Hook); Johnny Tamblyn

(Jim); "Overtake": Jeff Jordan (Chris); David Avin (Larry); Kevin Draine (Martin); Michael R. Smith (Frank); Terrill Douglas, Bob Gonzalez, Walter Kaufmann (Addict); "Fright": Paul Kaufmann (Steve); Barbara Jackson (Mother); Josh Craig (Chucky); Sara Craig (Susie); Lori Tate (Cheryl); Walter Kauffman (Joe); Michael R. Smith (Satan Claus); "Skull and Crossbones": Lawrence C. Campbell (The Pirate); Harold Odom (The Black Man); William Cooke (The Cabin Boy); F. Douglas Gore, Eric Jon Litea, Dan Rogers, Michael R. Smith, Tracy Huggins (Zombies).

CREW: Crimson Productions Presents *Campfire Tales*. *Costume Designer:* Belinda James. *Make-up Effects:* Michael R. Smith. *Music:* Kevin Green, Stan Lollis, Steve Borders. *Art Direction:* Belinda L. James. *Lighting Director:* Eric John Litra. *Film Editor:* Roger Thomas. *Producer:* Paul Talbot. *Written and directed by:* William Cooke and Paul Talbot. *MPAA Rating:* NA. *Running time:* 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: While out camping, three teenage boys (Roberts, Holton, and Ballard) encounter a bearded stranger (Hansen) who tells them three blood-curdling tales. The first vignette involves lover's lane and a mad killer with a hook. The second story involves two wayward teens who try to score some weed but smoke bad dope that makes their bodies decay and their brains atrophy to goop. In the third tale, a greedy and murderous yuppie is paid an unwelcome visit by Satan Claus on Christmas Eve after naughty behavior. And finally, the stranger tells the boys a story of a sea captain trapped on an inescapable island populated by zombie pirates.

COMMENTARY: Made independently on a shoestring budget in South Carolina, *Campfire Tales* is an inventive little anthology that really runs the gamut in terms of quality. It opens weak, with dreadful acting and storytelling and then picks itself up, dusts itself off, and goes for the gusto in the second and third tales. The film's final story, a period piece concerning zombie pirates, is ambitious as all get-out, but not quite on a par with the film's strong middle section.

The acting isn't going to win any prizes in *Campfire Tales*, and this is true in the wraparound tale featuring Gunnar Hansen as well as the stories themselves. After a few minutes, one gets the feeling the filmmaker's relatives are being featured, or maybe local high school students. Hansen himself is no great shakes in the emoting department. His strength, as evidenced by his horror starmaking role in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* as Leatherface, is his awesome physicality. Unfortunately, that's the very factor that Hansen can't bring to bear in this horror anthology, since for the duration of his scenes he's sedentary, seated at a camp-fire, spinning tales to

frightened kids.

The first story in *Campfire Tales* is entitled "The Hook" and it's a straight-up adaptation of the urban legend of the same name, diagrammed by sociologist Jan Harold Brunvand in his landmark text, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings*. On page 48 of that book, Brunvand describes "The Hook," a tale which first appeared in a "Dear Abby" column on November 8, 1960.

The common elements of the tale: a madman with a hook, the location of lover's lane, a parked car, and young boyfriend and girlfriend getting hot and heavy. Brunvand interpreted the story (which also has been recounted in Indiana, Kansas, Texas, Oregon, Wisconsin and Canada) as one of adolescent sexual angst. This very same urban legend appears, in various forms, in 1990s films including *Candyman* (1992), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) and the aptly-titled *Urban Legend* (1998).

In *Campfire Tales*, Susan and Jim are out parking when the radio reports that a madman has escaped from local Belvedere Hospital. Of course, this is the killer with the hook, and in a twist on the familiar legend, he decapitates his victims and turns their severed heads into Jack-O-Lanterns. Susan insists Jim take her home at once, but the killer follows.

The story involves the most rudimentary acting and lighting scheme you can imagine. The movie doesn't look at all like a typical or professional Hollywood product. But then again, in the 1990s, that can actually be a blessing, considering the overall conformity of films. At least there's some effectively creepy music as Susan returns home only to learn the killer has already been there.

Rather lamely, the Hook Killer is finally revealed and doesn't look any older than the imperiled teens, and certainly not old enough to have been a Vietnam veteran, as the film indicates. Overall, it's an inauspicious note to start on.

The second story, "Overtoke," makes up for "The Hook," however. It too revolves around an urban legend: the cautionary tale of "bad dope." Here, two teenagers are out to score some weed on a dark night when they learn that a guy named Frank has "the best deals in town" plus "an endless supply" thanks to a fertile plant growing in his backyard. The curious teenagers have no money to pay for the weed, alas, but mysteriously Frank tells them that "it's fine. You're one of us now."

After smoking the weed, the two teenage boys began to decay before the audience's eyes. Their bodies rot, their hair falls out, they ooze green slime and even chew down their own fingers to the bone.

Amusingly, some of this grotesque material is played against a few shots of the famous *Night of the Living Dead* zombie feasting scene on the television. Hooked completely, the boys keep going back for more, until they are finally reduced to nothing but creamy gruel. In one disgusting (but again, amusing, shot), a cat eagerly licks up their liquefied, goopy remains from the basement floor.

It's not difficult to get the point here: drugs are unsafe, and partaking in them is, literally, selfdestructive behavior. But "Overtake" is tons more effective than any "Just Say No" campaign and a fun, gory treat.

Campfire Tales' third story is another cautionary one, this time aimed at materialistic yuppies, a trait it shares in common with *Ghost* and *Flatliners*. A so-called "heartless bastard" named Steve returns home for the holidays and is ungrateful and cruel to his kind, giving mother. He's a failure in business and desperately needs his Momma's fortunes to recover his earnings. More so, Steve doesn't want to compete with the grandchildren for it. So he kills Mom on Christmas Eve, throwing her down the stairs, and then offers to babysit the grandkids with the intent of killing them as well.

But, in classic horror movie fashion, the avaricious yuppie receives a yuletide visit from Satan Claus, an evil Santa. He's a cackling, macabre figure with a hatchet, witch's nose and long beard. And he knows that Steve has been naughty. Satan Claus stalks Steve, disembowels him, removes his heart, and then strings him up with Christmas lights. Joy to the world, a yuppie is dead.

Like "Overtake," this tale (titled "Fright") boasts a didactic purpose, marshaling the myth of Santa Claus (or rather, Satan Claus) to pass judgment on a materialistic man who cares nothing for family or holidays, just for money. Like "Overtake," "Fright" is well-presented and pretty compelling.

The last story in the anthology, the period piece "Skull and Crossbones," feels like a big misstep tonally since all the other tales occur in the present-day and in American suburbia. Here, a pirate awakens on a lonely shore sometime in the era of mercantilism and learns from a freed black slave that "nobody who comes here ever leaves." Worse, the "evil of temptation" is afoot, since there's a zombie's treasure to acquire. In attempting to do so, the captain raises the ire of the dead pirates, and sword-fights the ghouls in the surf.

An early, cheap variation on the *Pirates of the Caribbean* aesthetic (monsters and pirates: perfect together), this tale is handsomely mounted but pretty dull, and without any genuine sense of surprise. It's a bit long too. Not the high note to go out on that a successful

anthology depends on.

Campfire Tales is raw, rough and cheap, but energetic and ambitious. "Overtake" and "Fright" are worth the price of admission and in toto, the film offers more thrills than plenty of big-budget 1990s horrors. "Hook" and "Skull and Crossbones" don't quite work, along with the wraparound tale, but *Campfire Tales* nonetheless holds the attention, and quickens the pulse.

Cape Fear * * * *

Critical Reception

"Martin Scorsese's 1991 boot to the skull features Bobby D. at his most extravagant and least interesting, hiding behind accents and tattoos while doing little more than scowling and mugging for the camera. Scorsese is too intellectual a filmmaker to wholeheartedly embrace domestic schlock, so the film (still his biggest hit) plays like a Pavlovian exercise in audience manipulation, the closest he's ever come to being Oliver Stone."—Sam Adams, *Philadelphia City Paper*, December 27, 2001

"Although at first I considered this Scorsese/De Niro collaboration an improvement on the 1950s Gregory Peck/Robert Mitchum original, time has caused me to reconsider. Marty's nihilistic version is now woefully dated, and his post-modern defamation of some of the original's characters (Peck's heroic father figure becomes a sniveling coward as portrayed by Nick Nolte) is tiresomely cynical. De Niro hams it up as Cady, possessing none of the subtle evil of Mitchum's performance."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Nick Nolte (Sam Bowden); Robert De Niro (Max Cady); Jessica Lange (Leigh); Juliette Lewis (Danielle Bowden); Robert Mitchum (Lt. Elgart); Joe Don Baker (Claude Kersek); Gregory Peck (Lee Heller); Martin Balsam (Judge); Fred Dalton Thompson (Tom); Illeana Douglas (Lori Davis); Zully Montero (Graciela).

CREW: Universal Studios and Amblin Entertainment in

association with Cappa films and Tribeca Productions present a Martin Scorsese Picture. *Casting*: Ellen Lewis. *Title Sequence*: Elaine and Saul Bass. *Bernard Herrmann's original score arranged and conducted by*: Elmer Bernstein. *Costume Designer*: Rita Ryack. *Film Editor*: Thelma Schoonmaker. *Production Designer*: Henry Bumstead. *Director of Photography*: Freddie Francis. *Executive Producers*: Kathleen Kennedy, Frank Marshall. *Based on a screenplay by*: James R. Webb *and the novel The Executioner by*: John D. Mac-Donald. *Written by*: Wesley Strick. *Produced by*: Barbara De Fina. *Directed by*: Martin Scorsese. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 128 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Max Cady (De Niro), convicted for battery fourteen years ago, leaves prison and immediately begins to harass the family of his former defense attorney, Sam Bowden (Nolte), because he buried exculpatory evidence during Cady's trial. Now, Cady befriends Danielle (Lewis), Bowden's teenage daughter, and then escalates his attacks. When the Bowden's flee town and vacation on their house boat at Cape Fear, Cady is never more than a breath behind them.

COMMENTARY: In his dazzling remake of the 1962 classic *Cape Fear*, director Martin Scorsese brings the interloper Max Cady into the 1990s with a vengeance.

De Niro's tongue-speaking, tattooed madman gets released from prison after fourteen years of wrongful incarceration during one of the film's earliest scenes and, in a visual metaphor depicting his mad, aggressive nature, Cady strides right into the camera itself, eclipsing every corner of the frame and filling it with blackness (his long shadow, essentially).

The selection of this shot informs the audience that Cady is literally out-of-order, a violator bent on destroying all that which a middle class, yuppie family holds dear. Nothing, not even the camera itself, is going to get in his way.

Cady's primary target in the film is Sam Bowden (Nick Nolte), a man from the South who "knows how to fight dirty for a living." He is a slick attorney with an exaggerated drawl who has cheated on his wife, Leigh (Lange), in the past. And as the movie begins, Sam is contemplating a sexual liaison with a young woman who blindly admires him, Lori (Douglas). He doesn't seem to be the kind of guy who learns from his mistakes.

But Bowden is Cady's target because, fourteen years ago, in his professional capacity as the criminal's lawyer, Bowden hid a report with exculpatory evidence—information that Cady's victim in a physical assault had a personal history of promiscuity. Consequently,

Cady went to jail and lost a lot.

Cady lost his freedom. He lost his dignity. And he even lost his cherry, sodomized by fellow inmates repeatedly, as he tells Sam in frank, unembarrassed terms. Now, Cady hopes to teach Sam a lesson "in loss" and "in commitment" by destroying the innocence of his rebellious adolescent daughter, Danielle (Lewis), who—as children often do in such films—represents Sam's tomorrow, his future itself.

Like many victims of interloping stalkers, Sam Bowden in *Cape Fear* is at least partially responsible for Cady's righteous anger. He acted unprofessionally and unethically fourteen years earlier. What's more important, however, is that Sam is highly *vulnerable* to Cady's incursions into his life.

For instance, as noted above, Sam is estranged from Leigh, his wife, and Scorsese visually notes this during a scene of the couple making love. As their wedding rings touch during the act, the image itself turns negative; imagery totally inverted, indicating it is the opposite of what it appears. So while there still may be sex in this marriage, it is not necessarily a positive thing. There doesn't seem to be trust to go with it. And without trust, Leigh is vulnerable. She is curious about Max Cady, the man who has defied her husband so brazenly. This opens the door a crack for Cady. He "visits" Leigh, on one occasion, and is flirtatious with her.

Furthermore, Sam is vulnerable because Cady did what he didn't do to begin with: *his homework*. In prison, Cady studied up on law books and thus understands now how to skirt the edges of the law, how to harass the Bowdens and remain free, on the loose ... untouchable.

After so many years of tweaking the legal system for his ends, Sam is now faced with an opponent who can do the same thing, and he doesn't like it. Accordingly, Sam soon resorts to illegal tactics. He hires a gang of thugs to take out Cady.

But Cady is no ordinary stalker in *Cape Fear*; rather he's a nearly an invincible one. He defeats the thugs, understands that his "counselor" is behind the assault, and just keeps raising the stakes. Cady has prepared for his campaign too: "my mission was to become more than human," he explains to Leigh, after he proves utterly resistant to physical pain.

Later, Sam learns he could also lose his very livelihood, his law license, over his various moral infractions. At the same time, Cady evades every new plan, every new set-up, every trap to catch him, which makes this Boogeyman the interloper equivalent of Hannibal Lecter, a force of nature itself, heir to slashers Jason and Michael ...

but far more talkative.

In the film's final act, Cady's vengeance seems to bring down a veritable Biblical storm that threatens to drown the Bowdens, and ultimately Cady himself. Our last view of the lunatic involves him sinking, inch-by-laborious-inch, into swirling, angry waters, while he speaks entirely in tongues.



Max Cady (Robert De Niro, left) plans to teach his former lawyer, Sam Bowden (Nick Nolte), about the meaning of loss in *Cape Fear* (1991).

This climax also involves the Bowden family seeking refuge on a houseboat that becomes adrift—a metaphor for the family's alienated-from-each-other domestic existence. And when Sam ultimately dives through a ring of water, a vortex during the final fight, you get the sense he is diving through the Ninth Circle of Hell itself for his family. And also that, finally, Cady has taught him about "commitment."

As Cady informs Sam early in the film, "Every man has to go through Hell to reach his paradise," and this ending on the river literalizes that concept. Sam goes through Hell to preserve his family.

Cape Fear ends with a traumatized Danielle, Juliette Lewis in an astounding, convincing performance, dutifully recounting the events surrounding Cady's attack. She says she fears that "to remember his name or what he did" will send her into "his dreams," and the movie ends on a negative image of her traumatized, hollow eyes.

So the American family survives the incursion by this interloper, but only just. And Danielle will feel the impact of Max Cady for the rest of her days.

Finally, much of *Cape Fear* involves the Bible and Cady's unusual reading of Scripture (he's a Pentecostal whose father was a snake handler). In keeping with that leitmotif, it's not hard to see that Sam's moral lapse has expelled his loved ones, the Bowden family, from the innocent paradise they didn't even realize they enjoyed.

Cape Fear rigorously adheres to all the tenets of the interloper formula. Cady kills the family pet (a dog), and escalates his presence in the Bowdens' life from an early annoying appearance in a movie theater showing *Problem Child* to the invasive attack on domestic "sacred" ground aboard the boat. And Cady is, in some fashion, morally justified for his hatred of his primary target, Sam.

Unusually, Scorsese's approach in *Cape Fear* is one of the sledgehammer. With powerful strike after strike, the director transforms this seemingly ordinary tale of a determined interloper into an out-and-out horror film of expressionist dimension and shape. With a portentous score re-purposed from the original film, buckets of blood, images turning negative, and the ramping up of Cady's inhuman, monstrous abilities, this is indeed the story of the "Big, Bad Wolf" at the doorstep of yuppie America. Max's under-the-surface identity (as wolf amongst the sheep) is mirrored even in his joyful taunting of Bowden. "Come out, come out, wherever you are...."

De Niro has been accused of going over the top in his performance in *Cape Fear*, and Ben Stiller once did a wicked impression of De Niro's Cady on *The Ben Stiller Show* (1992). But De Niro's extreme approach seems carefully etched to mirror Cady's larger-than-life capabilities and view of himself as God's Hammer. Like Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*, De Niro's Cady is a monster who wishes to terrorize not just in deed, but in word too. He fancies himself a teacher, a mentor to Danielle, and uses every cruel misdeed as an object lesson about faith and spirituality.

De Niro's "big" performance matches exactly Scorsese's "big," stylish approach in *Cape Fear* and by the end of the movie, the audience is left, literally, quaking and unhinged. Cady is not merely a run-of-the-mill interloper, he is a tidal wave of terror, a frigging "force majeure" sweeping through the life of one very unlucky family like a hurricane. Like Danielle, when it's all over, we're traumatized. And since horror movies have a sacred duty to do the psyche harm, Scorsese's *Cape Fear* is a great example of the 1990s horror genre.

Children of the Night * *

Critical Reception

"This modest early entry in the nouveau vampire sweepstakes finds competent Tony (*Hellbound*) Randel drowning in a sea of script continuity and credibility problems.... Despite being virtually fang-free, Randel's blood-type B-movie is a watchable if negligible time-waster that won't cause Francis Coppola any sleepless nights."—Alan Jones, *Starburst*, August 1992, page 44

Cast and Crew

CAST: Karen Black (Karen Thompson); Peter DeLuise (Mark Gardner); Ami Dolenz (Lucy Barrett); Evan MacKenzie (Frank Aldin); Maya McLaughlin (Cindy Thompson); Jesette DiCarlo (Gates); David Sawyer (Zakyr); Garrett Morris (Matty); Shirley Spiegler Jacobs (Grandma); Daniel Arthur Wray (Doc Fisher).

CREW: Fangoria Films Presents a Film by Tony Randel. *Casting:* Robin Monroe. *Music:* Daniel Licht. *Special Effects Make-up:* KNB Effects Group. *Film Editor:* Rick Roberts. *Production Designer:* Kim Hix. *Director of Photography:* Richard Michalak. *Co-Producer:* Damon Santostefano. *Executive Producers:* Norman and Steven Jacobs. *Story by:* Christopher Webster, Nicolas Falacci, Tony Randel. *Based upon an original screenplay by:* William Hopkins. *Written by:* Nicolas Falacci. *Produced by:* Christopher Webster. *Directed by:* Tony Randel. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two teenagers (Dolenz, McLaughlin) from the town of Allburg accidentally resurrect a vampire (Sawyer) while swimming in a crypt beneath an abandoned church. A local priest and his schoolteacher friend (DeLuise) in nearby River Junction learn of the spreading vampire scourge and attempt to stop it. The first stop: saving Lucy (Dolenz) from her vampiric granny (Jacobs).

COMMENTARY: Produced by *Fangoria Magazine*, *Children of the Night* plays like a weak echo of Stephen King's *'Salem's Lot*, with a small town being transformed wholesale into drooling vampires. The movie highlights many superficially stylish visuals, including some dazzling swoops and pans, as well as a lot of 45 degree *Batman* styled angles, but experiences trouble maintaining a consistent tone and a narrative

through line. This comes as a surprise, considering that the director is Tony Randel, the talent who gave the world the grotesque and highly effective *Hellbound: Hellraiser II* (1988).

In fairness, there are some stand-out scenes in *Children of the Night*. Early on, two teenage, female friends swim together in a creepy, dimlylit underground crypt, where a frightening vampire dwells in secret. The location is well-captured, and the scene has a good, strong ominous feel about it.

Later, after one girl, Cindy (McLaughlin), is bitten and becomes a creature of the night, there's a tender scene in which she confesses to her buddy that she misses her humanity. "I can't feel things the way I used to," Cindy explains to her once-friend. "Everything is about killing and eating."

The performances in this scene are quite strong, as is the sense of tragic separation, of friends torn apart. The moment also fits into the larger theme here: the idea of religion (or vampirism, for that matter) as isolating force. For example, the film's protagonist is a schoolteacher (DeLuise) who has gotten in trouble for teaching the Bible as literature rather than as gospel truth. This has caused him to be rejected by many townspeople. Similarly, another main character is a priest who has fallen in love with a woman (Black) and is therefore experiencing a crisis of religious faith. Belief in something can prove dangerous, and lonely.



A vampiric Karen Black (right) makes a move on Catholic priest, Evan MacKenzie, in the Fangoria film *Children of the Night* (1991).

Nice moments and ideas like this, however, are off-set by moments which are too jokey to be taken seriously. The master vampire arrives in town on bingo night, for instance, and that's just silly. One character—let's call her Granny Vampire—gets played almost entirely for laughs. And the town drunk portrayed by Garret Morris ends up driving "The Christmobile" to stop the rampaging vampires. After the final battle, he also courageously gives up alcoholism, totally reformed. Taken together, these scenes make the movie both campy and schmaltsy.

Even more oddly, Karen Black is in the film in a miniscule role, and spends her time in the movie writhing around in bad vampire make-up in a locked bedroom. Her scenes feel phoned in from an entirely different film. The film's ending is a cop-out too, with all the survivors in town un-vampirifying on cue.

In the 1990s, the vampire was a monster in transition. Even Dracula himself was transforming into something new and more vital to the times. Some of the decade's films saw vampires as passionate, tragic lovers (*Bram Stoker's Dracula*, *Interview with the Vampire*), as a

vulture-like upper class rulers feeding on human carrion (*Blade*), and other ventures saw them as, respectively, emo pre- *Twilighters* (*To Sleep with a Vampire*) and Sam Peckinpah- ish pack-animals (*John Carpenter's Vampires*). *Children of the Night* doesn't add any new wrinkles to this old legend, and doesn't go about depicting their reign of terror in any kind of consistent tone. The result is a minor, only sporadically interesting film from a director who has done better.

***Child's Play 3: Look Who's Stalking* * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Justin Whalin (Andy Barclay); Brad Dourif (Voice of Chucky); Perrey Reeves (Krista De Silva); Jeremy Sylvers (Tyler); Peter Haskell (Sullivan); Dakin Matthews (Colonel Cochrane); Travis Fine (Shelton); Dean Jacobson (Whitehurst); Matthew Walker (Ellis); Andrew Robinson (Sgt. Botnick); Donna Eskra (Ivers); Richard Marion (Patterson); Ron Fassler (Petzold); Terry Wills (Garbage Man); Laura Owens (Lady Executive).

CREW: Universal Studios Presents *Child's Play 3*. *CASTING:* Glenn Daniels. *CHUCKY DOLL CREATED BY:* David Kirschner. *BASED ON CHARACTERS CREATED BY:* Don Mancini. *CHUCKY DESIGNED AND ENGINEERED BY:* Kevin Yagher. *MUSIC:* Cory Lerios, John D'Andrea. *FILM EDITORS:* Edward A. Warschilka, Jr., Scott Wallace. *PRODUCTION DESIGNER:* Richard Sawyer. *DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:* John R. Leonetti. *CO-PRODUCER:* Laura Moskowitz. *EXECUTIVE PRODUCER:* David Kirschner. *WRITTEN BY:* Don Mancini. *PRODUCED BY:* Robert Latham Brown. *DIRECTED BY:* Jack Bender. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

INCANTATION: "Don't fuck with the Chuck!"— Charles Lee Ray (Brad Dourif) quips in *Child's Play 3*.

SYNOPSIS: Good Guys Corp. re-opens the factory and starts mass-producing a Good Guy doll for the 1990s. In short order, the murderous Chucky (Dourif) is re-born in a new doll and promptly kills the company CEO, Sullivan (Haskell). He then sets-off after Andy Barclay again (Whalin), now a 16-year-old delinquent remanded to Kent Military School. Realizing he is in a new body with new rules, Chucky attempts to move his soul into a young recruit named Tyler (Sylvers), but Andy finds out and attempts to stop the transfer. The final battle is fought in an amusement park attraction called "The

COMMENTARY: Chucky meets *Taps* (1981) in *Child's Play 3*, the third entry in the popular killer doll franchise. Set in the then-future year of 1996 (eight years after the events of 1988's *Child's Play*), the film by director Jack Bender sends Chucky and adolescent Andy, now played by Justin Whalin, to a military academy where cruelty has become institutionalized and the Lakeshore Strangler has a field day. The film features kills utilizing toys, a garbage truck, live ammo (during a war game exercise), and an amusement park. The film even acknowledges, albeit subtly, the horrors of war, and Vietnam in particular.

The third time around, Chucky—again voiced with maniacal glee by Brad Dourif—is up to his same old game, attempting to play "hide the soul" with a little boy so as to re-locate his nasty spirit into an unwitting human body. The familiar plot line is difficult to liven up, despite the change in venue to a military academy and the inclusion of ever more outrageous death scenes.

On that front, a CEO gets butchered early in the proceedings when Chucky throws darts at his rear end and then strangles him with a yo-yo. Vicious Sgt. Botnick, the academy barber played by Andy Robinson, gets his appropriate comeuppance too, after he takes sadistic glee in torturing the school's student body during their buzz-cuts.

One particularly amusing death scene sees Chucky jump out and startle the school commandant, Cochran (Matthews), a man who promptly dies on the spot from a fatal heart attack. Even Chucky can't quite believe it was that easy.

But the film's only electric jolt arrives early on, as young Tyler steals the Good Guys doll from Andy and stares at the over-sized, yellow package. Before you can shout "boo," the previously-unmoving Chucky Doll lunges out of the box's sealed plastic wrap, right at him, his visage a rictus of pure, rage-filled hate. It's a bracing shock, but not nearly enough to redeem the film overall.

Child's Play 3 comments, at least implicitly, on the manner in which the military experience transforms children into killers. At Kent, where soldiers take "bed-wetters and turn them into men," kids are taught to be cruel to one another (using Scripture as a guide), and to seize and exploit the weaknesses of compatriots. In this macho environment, Chucky doesn't even have to do all the killing himself; he just has to substitute live ammo for paint balls during one exercise. Really, it's almost too easy.

The last scene in the film is even a graduation of sorts—a

graduation to real warfare. In the amusement park, there's a giant, deadly fan that makes the sound-effect of a whirring helicopter propeller like one you might hear in a war film. And to save the innocent Tyler, Andy must ascend a mountain of skulls (part of the Devil's Lair attraction) that certainly recalls American involvement in Vietnam. With the military setting, the warfare imagery, and Andy's dedicated resistance to guns, *Child's Play 3* offers a critique of the military culture.

Given this anti-violence subtext, it's ironic that *Child's Play 3* actually became a cause célèbre in the United Kingdom upon the film's video release. A two-year-old boy, James Bulger, was murdered on February 12, 1993, by two eleven-yearold boys, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson. Much was made in the press over an account that one of the boys "might" have seen *Child's Play 3*, a so-called video nasty, before committing the horrible murder.

Ultimately, the film's role in the murder was denied: it was never proven that the boy had actually watched it at all. Yet *Child's Play 3* was branded with a sort of infamy that it didn't deserve. It's not a great horror movie, but it sure as hell isn't one likely to create real-life murderers either.

Ultimately, *Child's Play 3* fails simply because it isn't particularly fresh. Also, Andy Barclay is not a very interesting character to follow this time around. He has been in and out of foster homes for almost a decade and battled Chucky twice, yet Andy seems to boast almost no survival skills from either experience. As a teenager, one would expect the boy to be hard, bitter, and ready to defend himself at a moment's notice.

But he's not. *Child's Play 3* just makes him a nice guy that nobody listens to. Just as Laurie Strode became better equipped to battle Michael Myers over time, Andy Barclay should be a worthier opponent for Chucky this third time out. And he isn't. Snap to it, soldier!

Critters 3 * 1/2

Cast and Crew

CAST: Aimee Brooks (Annie); John Calvin (Clifford); Katherine Cortez (Marcia); Leonardo DiCaprio (Josh); Geoffrey Blake (Frank);

Dana Bellamy (Rosalle); William Dennis Hunt (Briggs); Frances Bay (Mrs. Menges); Bill Zuckert (Mr. Menges); Don Oppen (Charlie McFadden); Terrance Mann (Ug); Jose Luis Valenzuela (Mario); Nina Axelrod (Betty Briggs).

CREW: New Line Cinema Presents an OH Films Production.

Casting: Nina Axelrod. *Associate Producer:* Mark Ordesky. *Director of Photography:* Tom Callaway. *Production Designer:* Phillip Dean Foreman. *Film Editor:* Terry Stokes. *Music:* David C. Williams. *Critters created by:* Chiodo Brothers. *Story by:* Rupert Harvey, Barry Oppen. *Written by:* David J. Schow. *Produced by:* Barry Oppen and Rupert Harvey. *Directed by:* Kristine Peterson. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Annie (Brooks) and her family move into a rundown apartment building, unaware that the alien critters from Grover's Bend have also moved in. The critters kill the building maintenance man, Frank (Blake), who has been trying to force out the residents at the landlord's behest. Then they kill the landlord, Briggs (Hunt), orphaning his stepson, Josh (DiCaprio), in the process. Before long, Annie, Josh and the other survivors in the building flee to the attic and hope to fend off a final ambush by the critters even as a fire rages on the floors below.

COMMENTARY: The thrills and pleasures are mild indeed in *Critters 3*, a low-rent continuation of the furry-alien monster franchise.

In retrospect, *Critters* was a good film, *Critters 2* was okay, and *Critters 3* continues the apparently inevitable downward spiral. The third entry is a film of modest means and even more modest accomplishment, and one likely remembered today only because it features a very young Leonardo Di-Caprio in a leading role. That may make it historically important, but in terms of *Critters* continuity it's not much to write home about.

In the tradition of *Troll* (1986), *Critters* settles down quickly into one setting: a dilapidated apartment building populated by colorful (meaning goofy) tenants. There's the uber-competent repair woman named Marcia, the fat lady, Rosalie, the elderly couple who live upstairs and believe in UFO conspiracies, and even the evil landlord (the stepfather of DiCaprio's character). You've seen all these characters before in sitcoms, and *Critters 3* doesn't do much to make them seem more than one-note jokes.

However, the critters themselves are still funny while doing their violent, humorous shtick, whether attacking fuzzy slippers in the apartment building's basement, getting bowled down a staircase, or

meeting the business end of a mop. One critter gets bleached, another eats dish detergent and blows bubbles and yet another eats baked beans and spends the next scene farting.

If this kind of low brow, campy humor is up your alley, there are some giggles to be had, I suppose. I must admit, I still enjoy the fact that whenever the critters "speak," the movies cut to ridiculous subtitles for English translation. "Dessert!" the critters exclaim happily at one point, eyeing up humans. So that's what that growl meant...

What seems absent from the mix this time around is any true sense of menace or terror. With all the kiddies and old people running around, *Critters 3* digs in its heels with juvenile humor, reserving violence only for Uncle Frankie, who is a really, really bad guy, and utterly deserves his comeuppance.

But perhaps the worst part of *Critters 3* is saved for last: the movie ends with a blatant hook for yet another unnecessary sequel.

Watching a movie like *Critters 3*, you get the feeling that everyone treated it as a joke, and I submit that this is not a good or even valid way to handle a franchise, even a low-rent one. Instead, first tell a serious, scary story and then mine that scary situation for appropriate humor, if applicable. That's how *Critters* succeeded, and because that approach is absent, it's also why *Critters 3* fails so dramatically.

You just know *Critters 3* is pandering to the lowest common denominator when it resorts to having a fat lady, Rosie, fall in love with series regular and schmuck, Charlie (Don Oppen), improbably calling the goofball "a hunk." *Oh, those silly fat ladies!* Always good for a cheap laugh, aren't they?

In terms of quality, *Critters 3* is that fat lady singing.

***Dead Again* * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kenneth Branagh (Roman Strauss/Mike Church); Emma Thompson (Margaret Strauss/ Grace); Andy Garcia (Gray Baker); Derek Jacobi (Franklyn Madison); Wayne Knight (Pete Dugan); Hanna Schygulla (Inga); Campbell Scott (Doug/ Mark); Jo Anderson (Sister Madelaine/Starlet); Christine Ebersol (Lydia Larson); Robin Williams (Dr. Cozy Carlisle); Raymond Cruz (Clerk).

CREW: Paramount Pictures presents a Mirage Production, a Kenneth Branagh film. *Casting:* Gail Levin. *Music:* Patrick Doyle. *Costume Designer:* Phyllis Dalton. *Co-Producer:* Dennis Feldman. *Film Editor:* Peter E. Berger. *Production Designer:* Tim Harvey. *Director of Photography:* Matthew F. Leonetti. *Executive Producer:* Sydney Pollack. *Written by:* Scott Frank. *Produced by:* Lindsay Doran, Charles H. Maguire. *Written by:* Scott Frank. *Directed by:* Kenneth Branagh. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 107 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Detective Mike Church (Branagh) becomes involved in the case of an amnesiac woman, Grace (Thompson), who suffers from terrible nightmares. With the help of a hypnotist, Franklyn (Jacobi), Grace is regressed to a previous life, where she reports on the great love affair of composer Roman Strauss and his wife, Margaret. Their passion led to murder, and now Grace and Mike seem to be reliving aspects of their timeless love story.

COMMENTARY: Director Kenneth Branagh stages a melodramatic and kinetic film-noir horror film in *Dead Again*, an unfettered, inventive narrative that deals with the in-vogue 1990s concept of past-life regression, which was also featured on such programs as *The X-Files* during the decade, particularly in the fourth season episode "The Field Where I Died."

Delightfully, Branagh and writer Frank provide an audacious third-act twist in *Dead Again* that undercuts the predictable, cyclical nature of the story (since history repeats...), and involves the very identities of those regressed. It all comes together in rip-roaring and imaginative fashion.

Dead Again is deliberately big, bold and brassy, opening with a dramatic headline splash in all-caps (and black-and-white)—"**MURDER!**"— and then meditating on the natures of death and love.

"To die is different from what anyone supposes," says murder suspect Roman Strauss, quoting Walt Whitman. "This is all far from over...."

That's a romantic notion. If at first we don't succeed in love, we get a second chance in another life. But then Robin Williams comes into the picture as an utterly cynical psychologist and punctures the romantic balloon with a wonderfully mean-spirited performance.

In very funny fashion, he discusses fate and karma, thus mapping the movie's thematic territory, even as detective Mike Church and amnesiac Grace (Thompson) grapple with a murder mystery from fifty years earlier. In Grace's instance, her obsession with that past life has spilled over into her subconscious and she has grown obsessed with

the murder weapon of a different life: *scissors*. The first view of Grace's apartment, late in the film, plays lightly with this obsession, as scissors represent the totality of her décor. Big scissors, little scissors, and more.

The tension in *Dead Again* arises from the fact that Grace and Mike might be doomed to repeat the same mistakes in this life that they made in a previous life—that history will repeat itself. Branagh plays this expectation for all it is worth, diving into stylistic excesses with a real sense of fun, a quality missing from his *Frankenstein* adaptation later in the decade.



Grace (Emma Thompson, left) is hypnotized by Franklyn (Derek Jacobi, right) while private detective Mike Church (Kenneth Branagh) watches in *Dead Again* (1991).

In one instance, Branagh crosscuts between Margaret Strauss's murder and Roman Strauss completing his masterpiece, an original opera. It's a deliberate balance of creation against destruction, and to term the moment operatic is to do it an injustice. The film's final confrontation, in which those scissors play an important role, is also memorably heightened with pulse-pounding music, bodies in motion and flight, flashback imagery, cross-cutting, and superimposition.

At one moment during the battle between good and evil, there's a flash of Roman Strauss conducting his orchestra, and it's an appropriate image, since Branagh is our cinematic conductor, pulling all the instruments together for this epic and exaggerated crescendo.

Mixing noir procedural with fantasy elements like past lives, *Dead Again* proves never less than impressive as it charts the

trajectories of two romances. One is doomed; one can still be saved. *Dead Again* is also one of those movies that benefits from repeated viewings: there are snippets of song and dialogue (particularly involving the word "grace") which hint at major story points. And Branagh is gifted with camera moves, giving this tale a supremely epic sweep.

It is true that the movie may, on more than one occasion, go way over the top. But if you've ever been in a romantic relationship that literally feels like its life or death, you probably won't mind the glorious sense of excess and melodrama.

Eve of Destruction * * 1/2

Cast and Crew

CAST: Gregory Hines (Jim McQuade); Renee Soutendjik (Dr. Simmons); Michael Greene (General Curtis); Kurt Fuller (Schneider); John M. Jackson (Peter); Loren Haynes (Steve the Robot);

Alan Haufrect (Dr. Heller); Tim Russ (Carter); Mike Jolly (Stevenson); David Hayward (Cal); Greg Collins (Skaaren); Jim Antonio (Bill Kleinow).

CREW: MGM and Nelson Entertainment Pre -sent an Interscope Communications Production. *CASTING:* Marci Liroff. *Executive Producers:* Robert M. Cort, Melinda Jason, Rick Finkelstein. *Music:* Philippe Sarde. *Costume Designer:* Deborah L. Scott. *Film Editor:* Caroline Biggerstaff. *Production Designer:* Peter Lamont. *Director of Photography:* Alan Hume. *Written by:* Duncan Gibbins, Yale Udoff. *Produced by:* David Madden. *Directed by:* Duncan Gibbins. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: EVE8, a humanoid robot, witnesses a bank robbery on a test run and goes rogue after being damaged in a gun battle with the robbers. Anti-terrorist expert Jim McQuade (Hines) and EVE's creator and doppelganger Dr. Eve Simmons (Soutendjik) team up to stop the robot, which is locked in "Battlefield Mode" and may go nuclear at any moment. On the trail of the renegade machine, Dr. Simmons deduces that EVE8 is living out her sexual fantasies, and, without inhibition, confronting memories she herself has repressed. In New York City, EVE8 abducts Dr. Simmons' son, and a countdown to nuclear destruction looms as the robot seeks sanctuary in the subway system.

COMMENTARY: Relentlessly advertised as a "female" *Terminator*-style film featuring an out-of-control and "sexy" robot committing a little of the old ultra-violence, the low-budget *Eve of Destruction* is actually a different animal altogether: a Freudian-style, science-runs-amok Frankenstein story.

Specifically, the film involves a robot endowed with human memories and feelings, one who methodically and mechanically confronts the emotional inhibitions of her repressed, ice-princess creator. Renee Soutendijk plays both lead roles, that of the questing, "horny as well as psychopathic" robot and the tamped-down, straight-laced scientist.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) in *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) wrote about the "return of the repressed," the manner in which buried, repressed memories from childhood returned to adults as symptoms. These symptoms manifested as character traits, as sexual fantasies, what we refer to today as "Freudian slips," and so on.

In particular, Freud wrote about the "Dynamic Unconscious," the mental processes and contents defensively removed from consciousness. *Eve of Destruction* posits a glacial lead character, Dr. Eve Simmons, who has channeled all of her dynamic unconscious and repression (over the near-forgotten murder of her mother in childhood by her alcoholic father) into her revolutionary creation—into the EVE8 android.



The killer android Eve (Renee Soutendijk) abducts little Timmy (Ross Malinger) in *Eve of Destruction* (1991), a feminist twist on *The Terminator*.

So not only has Dr. Simmons repressed her dark personal memories, she has effectively deleted them from her human programming and downloaded them into her robotic child. The sins of the mother are passed on to the daughter, and it's another example of scientists playing God, or at least *playing Frankenstein*. And yet, heavily armed (with a nuclear trigger), EVE8 is not only able to defend against these bad memories in a manner that human Dr. Simmons can't, she is capable of ... terminating the source of the unpleasantness.

In other words, the EVE8 doppelganger is unfettered Id, willing and able to go back through Simmons's life with "no barriers, no stop signs and no inhibitions."



After a failed attempt at romance, a man (unidentified) gets manhandled by the android Eve (Renee Soutendijk) in *Eve of Destruction*.

As for poor, buttoned-up Eve Simmonds, she blushes and protests even when her young son innocently discusses a woman's "vagina" and "breasts." She objects when he calls the breasts "tits," acting on ugly family-of-origin memories she has repressed. It is no accident, perhaps, that Dr. Simmons has devoted her life to the creation of a "machine," one who doesn't feel ashamed of her body or her feelings but who simply experiences them.

The film's director and co-writer, Duncan Gibbins, noted of *Eve of Destruction* that the film involves "a woman's mind. Eve VIII gets the chance to go back and do it all again, something we all wish we could

In one provocative scene, EVE8 goes to a redneck saloon, a so-called "hooker joint," that Dr. Simmons fantasized about visiting in her younger days. She picks up a prospective lover there for the express purpose of casual sex. But when the knuckle-dragging, redneck partner she chooses goes too far and calls EVE8 a "bitch," thereby evoking unpleasant memories from the past, EVE8—the resolute warrior—commits a "bobbit." She bites off his penis.

Director Gibbins shoots this scene of violence from between and below the redneck's spread legs, a composition indicative of a trap, one visually surrounding EVE8 in the frame. Meanwhile, the female machine—kitten-like and supine on a bed—crawls upwards in the frame towards the object of her desire and fear, the offscreen phallus that Freud targeted as the final repository of male and female fixation.

Later, EVE8 goes on to similarly "resolve" issues with her alcoholic father (the source of the so-called Freudian Electra Complex), and also confront all the other uncomfortable feelings she associates with her "womanhood."

Taken together with the violent sexual escapade, this journey of self-discovery gazes at various stereotypically female impulses and therefore has something in common with 1995's *Species*, another horror film in which an unloosed "female" explores her dangerous biological drives while hunted by government agents. *Species* is a better film, but for all its deficiencies *Eve of Destruction* explores some powerful ideas about sex, especially in the explosive era of Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill.

For much of horror film history, the act of creating monsters has been assigned to a man in the mold of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a contravention of human nature since it is the female who creates life in her womb and delivers it into the world. *Eve of Destruction's* Dr. Simmons shares some qualities with Victor Frankenstein in that she waits far too long to confront the monstrosity she has created, so that, eventually, even her own loved ones are endangered.

And yet, sub textually-speaking, there is a therapeutic or cathartic aspect to EVE8's killing spree. EVE8 makes her "creator," her mother, face the things she has never before faced, a potent and undesired but ultimately helpful form of forced psycho-therapy. In a uniquely female way, this Frankenstein Monster creates as well as destroys ... she creates a sense of emotional catharsis for her estranged Mom.

Lurking in *Eve of Destruction* is a powerful narrative about all these themes, but as an action film it is almost entirely a bust. Shot on

threadbare sets and featuring a terrible musical score, the film never rouses the heart as much as it does the mind. The movie plays more like a nineties era cable TV movie than as a legitimate product of the cinema. This is shocking, since the film is lensed by the talented Alan Hume.

Gregory Hines, portraying McQuade here, spends most of the film yelling and screaming at Dr. Simmons, hectoring the good doctor and getting in her face. No wonder she's suspicious of men: the self-righteousness approach of McQuade quickly grows tiresome. By what right does a man who has dedicated his life to killing and warfare lecture this woman about playing God?

Eve of Destruction never addresses McQuade's hypocrisy. Instead, he's positioned as our hero, when what we really want is to learn more about Dr Simmons and her monster from the Id. But once more, a 1990s horror movie almost seems to hide behind a "procedural" or investigative format.

Bluntly stated, *Eve of Destruction* would have been a far superior film if it knowingly featured more psychological subtext and dropped some of the clichéd *Terminator*- style riffs. By the time of the climax, which finds EVE8 still on endless attack but sans one eye and one arm, the derivative nature of the enterprise supersedes the valuable and unique character flourishes. The ideas here are more interesting than the execution.

I'm old enough to remember how every genre magazine in creation talked up *Eve of Destruction* as the next *Terminator*, a marketing ploy on the part of the film's makers that set up the wrong expectations and made the film feel even more disappointing than it actually is. The real way to appreciate *Eve of Destruction* as much as possible is to forget the *Terminator*, and think Frankenstein ... in a skirt.

***Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* * ***

Critical Reception

"Here we are asked to believe that a monster—who has survived myriad deaths and been resurrected countless times could be disposed of with sticks of dynamite."—Nigel Floyd, *Sight and Sound Film Review*, Volume: May 1991–April 1992, BFI

" *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare*, the sixth and supposedly last in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, makes little, if any sense. There's no narrative drive, no logical plot turns and the much-touted celebrity guest stars—Roseanne Barr Arnold, Tom Arnold, Alice Cooper and Johnny Depp—have virtually nothing to do.... The non-3-D special effects throughout the film are pretty good, but the level of acting, along with such technical aspects as lighting and editing, are awful."—Chris Hicks, *Deseret News*, September 19, 1991

"While it wouldn't be the real final nightmare, it at least had 3D going for it, and some of the 3D worked pretty well. We learn much more about Freddy Krueger in this film than in the prior two installments (as if we needed to), and we even get a Johnny Depp cameo appearance. There was fun to be had here for those with low expectations, something that had been missing in the series since the third film. You could really tell at this point, however, that coming up with nightmares was getting hard for the writers."—William Latham, author *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"What a disappointing final chapter to the original *Elm Street* series! No 3-D gimmick could save this stale, sorry excuse for a horror movie, in which the once demonic Freddy's transformation into a vaudeville comedian is finally completed. We do get some of Krueger's back story via flashback, but otherwise this one is a waste of time."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Robert Englund (Freddy Krueger); Lisa Zane (Maggie); Shon Greenblatt (John Doe); Lezlie Deane (Tracy); Ricky Dean Logan (Carlos); Breckin Meyer (Spencer); Yaphet Kotto (Doc).

CREW: A New Line Cinema Production of a Rachel Talalay film. *Castings:* Jane Jenkins, Janet Hirshenson, Roger Mussenden. *Music:* Brian May. *Special Make-up Effects:* Magical Media Industries, Inc. *Special Visual Effects by:* The Chandler Group. *Film Editor:* Janice Hampton. *Production Design:* C.J. Strawn. *Director of Photography:* Declan Quinn. *Executive Producer:* Michael De Luca. *Story by:* Rachel Talalay. *Screenplay by:* Michael De Luca. *Produced by:* Robert Shaye, Aron Warner. *Directed by:* Rachel Talalay. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the year 2001, Freddy Krueger's hometown of Springwood is down to the last surviving teenager, John Doe (Greenblatt). Krueger sends the unknowing, amnesiac teen out of Springwood to fetch other children, as well as Freddy's own daughter, so the dream demon can continue his reign of terror. In no time, a therapist named Maggie (Zane), John, and three stowaway teens (Meyer, Deane, Logan) have returned to the abandoned, desolate Springwood in hopes of finding the clue to John's identity. What they find instead is a secret from Maggie's past, and the scourge of Springwood himself, Freddy.

COMMENTARY: Don't believe the tag-line. They didn't save the best for last. In fact, they saved the worst for last. *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* is a cheapskate, dopey, inconsistent, revisionist conclusion to the six-part *A Nightmare on Elm Street* saga that commenced with Wes Craven's landmark 1984 original.

Freddy's Dead is but a sad epitaph for a series that was once considered the Rolls Royce of horror franchises. But fact is fact: there isn't one scary moment in this sequel and the ridiculous script plays fast and loose with the "rules" of Freddy Krueger's well-established universe.

The problems with *Freddy's Dead* begin (but don't end) with the script, which fails to re-establish the "rules" for the dream demon, Freddy Krueger. For instance, much of the film is set in the desolated town of Springwood, where Freddy has killed just about everybody. Springwood is a "real place" not a dream world, and yet Freddy is able to re-shape it in the real world so that people that visit there can't escape. How does he accomplish this from the dream plane?

In the same vein, late in the film Freddy's daughter Maggie returns to the city (outside Springwood) and tells her superior that her three teenage wards have been killed. She is met by confusion from that superior because Freddy has "erased" all three teenagers from history. Again, how has the dream demon managed such a powerful incursion into consensus reality, into our waking world? If he can erase people from the flow of history, what can't he do? If he can get inside everybody's head and delete three the memory of three individuals, why can't he pinpoint his own daughter?

Rubber reality, the venue of the Freddy films, takes some thought and care, some maintenance and watering if it hopes to bloom. There must be a clear delineation between consensus reality and rubber reality, a balance between the nightmare world of Freddy and the physical world, where our protagonists have the home field

advantage. Why? Because if Freddy can do anything, accomplish any feat in our world, then there is absolutely no manner in which the dream demon can be destroyed—or at least not one that the audience can believe in. And without belief, or at least without suspension of disbelief, a horror movie becomes ... fantasy.



He can really hear a pin drop. The deaf Carlos (Ricky Dean Logan) is tortured by Freddy Krueger in 1991's *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare*.



A 3-D battle between father, Freddy (Robert Englund) and daughter Maggie (Lisa Zane) in *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare*.

The teenage characters in the film are treated in similarly slipshod fashion. They have no real individuality, only one "big" character trait that Freddy can exploit in their dreams. Carlos is deaf, so Freddy gives him a hearing aid that augments sound ... and destroys him. Spencer enjoys video games, so Freddy makes his nightmare a living video game in which Spencer is the player on the screen, and Freddy is at the joystick, manipulating him. Tracy is a tough, abused teen who likes kickboxing, as we amply see in a kickboxing montage staged to hip-hop music, so Freddy puts her back at home with her molesting father and gives her the chance to kick box him. It's all so on-the-nose and very predictable.

The real crime, however, is the treatment of Freddy's back story. The film reveals the evolution of Freddy from childhood through adulthood, through demonic afterlife even, but does so without any sense of reality or authentic darkness. Freddy is depicted as a "bad kid" who kills animals in school, and is seen being menaced by his Dad, played by Alice Cooper, but there's no viewpoint to the flashbacks. Was Freddy an abused kid who went bad? Born bad because of nature as the son of a gazillion maniacs? What were his dreams? Why was he so sick? This movie doesn't care. It just plays Freddy's history like a two-dimensional cartoon. We see Freddy mutilating himself and laughing about it like some silent screen, mustache-twirling villain. There's no authenticity or resonance to any of it. He's just EVIL!

The script doesn't seem to know much about *A Nightmare on Elm Street* history, either. It depicts a scene in which three very fake-looking dream demons circle Freddy and offer him the chance to become "immortal," essentially granting him his power. How come we've never seen or heard of these guys before? *Dream Master* (1988) depicted Freddy as a "guardian" of a nightmare gate ... not the vessel for dream demons.

Even more insultingly, Maggie's brilliant plan to kill Freddy is to find him in the dream world and then grab him so that when she wakes up, she will have brought him into our consensus reality ... where he is mortal and thus vulnerable.

As I recall, that was precisely Nancy's plan in the original *A Nightmare on Elm Street*! But never mind that, it's a crime how anticlimactic director Rachel Talalay makes Freddy's "final" death in this film. After all the spectacular, special-effects-laden deaths of the previous five films, which include burning, spiritual dissolution from the souls of his victims, and a pitched battle with his biological mum, Sister Krueger, Maggie just walks up to Freddy and guts him with his own finger knives, then she blows him up with a handy grenade. It's

the epitome of a letdown, in 3-D or not.

The movie has plenty of other problems. There are terrible lapses of tone, including the arch scene featuring Roseanne Barr and Tom Arnold, which is played tongue-in-cheek and over-the-top. Other situations tend towards the ridiculous and unbelievable too, particularly the explanation as to why Maggie should put on 3-D glasses before the climax. And the entire movie is so badly over-lit that you can see every wrinkle and crevice on Freddy's crinkled face.

In this light, he's about as scary-looking as Worf on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Other special effects are equally atrocious. A tour through Freddy's diabolical brain features miniature dungeon doors, fake dream worm demons and green strobe lights. It looks about as realistic as the corridor featured in the opening of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, which was supposed to look cheesy.

The best part of *Freddy's Dead* is the ending montage, which features infinitely better-realized scenes from previous franchise entries. Some good special effects, some funny moments, and some terrific memories are featured in that montage. Too bad the preceding eighty-nine minutes are an insult to the reigning king of horror.

Haunting Fear * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Brinke Stevens (Victoria Munroe); Jan-Michael Vincent (Trent); Jay Richardson (Terry Munroe); Delia Sheppard (Lisa); Karen Black (Dr. Julia Harcourt); Robert Clarke (Dr. Carlton); Robert Quarry (Visconti); Michael Berryman (Mortician); Hoke Howell (Father Corpse); Sherri Graham (Visconti's Squeeze); Mark Thomas McGee (Morgue Attendant #1); Jeff Yesko (Morgue Attendant #2).

CREW: American Independent Pictures presents a film by Fred Olen Ray. *Director of Photography:* Gary Graver. *Film Editor:* Chris Roth. *Music:* Chuck Cirino. *Written by:* Sherman Scott. *Based on "The Premature Burial" by:* Edgar Allan Poe. *Produced by:* Diane Jaffe. *Directed by:* Fred Olen Ray. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Victoria Munroe (Stevens) is consumed by nightmares about being buried alive, nightmares spawned by the recent death of her father. Dr. Carlton (Clarke), Victoria's physician and the man she blames for her father's death, recommends a hypnotist, Dr. Harcourt

(Black), after medication fails to prevent the nightmares. Meanwhile, Victoria's gambling husband, Terry (Richardson), and his secretary/mistress, Lisa (Sheppard), plot to kill Victoria, who has a weak heart, by locking her in a coffin. By killing his own wife, Terry hopes to use her fortune to pay back loan shark Visconti (Quarry) the eighty-thousand dollars he owes him. Meanwhile, Trent (Vincent)—Visconti's muscle—takes a liking to Vickie.

COMMENTARY: *Haunting Fear* has virtually nothing to do with Edgar Allan Poe's "The Premature Burial," except for the central idea of a lead character who fears being buried alive. That fact, however, does not mean *Haunting Fear* is a total loss. While it's not a good movie by any definition, this effort is likely one of the finest Fred Olen Ray genre pieces you'll see. Perhaps this is so because the director doesn't have to reckon with alien creatures, strange psychics and other overly-technical complications (*Biohazard* [1985], j'accuse).

Instead, *Haunting Fear* centers on actress Brinke Stevens, who gives a credible performance as Victoria, and on her cheating, no good husband, Terry, played by Jay Richardson. Between scenes of Victoria describing her fear of being buried alive to her doctor, Olen Ray stages energetic sex scenes between Richardson and the secretary played by Sheppard. There's a lot of sweat, a lot of gyrating, much dirty talk ... and abundant slapping.

Besides the sex scenes, *Haunting Fear* features two effective sequences. The first occurs as Victoria describes the nature of her nightmare. How no one can hear her screams, how it is deathly cold in the coffin, how she scratches at the wood of the casket, and how she hears her heart "beating" in her ears. This scene, all dialogue, more convincingly states the horror of premature burial than does the climax, which features Victoria trapped in a casket, but which oddly never seems claustrophobic.

The second effective scene involves *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) star Michael Berryman as a ghoulish albino coroner. Victoria has slipped into a coma, she believes, but is mistaken for dead by her husband and by Dr. Carlton. A blanket is draped over her head and she is taken to the morgue. There, Berryman's character cuts off her clothes, comments lasciviously about her physical beauty, and begins to drain her blood, to prepare for the embalming procedure. Then, he says, "time for the autopsy" and takes a knife to her chest. All this happens while Victoria, in voiceover, is arguing that she's not dead, that she's alive. It's ghoulish and disturbing, despite the fact it all turns out to be a dream.

Another nice touch in *Haunting Fear* is the soundtrack by Chuck

Cirno, which sounds like *The Exorcists's* "Tubular Bells" mated with John Carpenter's *Halloween* theme. The music is derivative, yes, but also highly effective, especially during the prologue, which involves Victoria approaching her father's corpse in the crypt.

For all these moments that work just fine, *Haunting Fear* is still hampered by some serious problems. For one thing, the movie involves a lengthy dream sequence in which Vicki believes she is dead (and visits that pasty-faced coroner). During that dream sequence, the movie cuts to Terry plotting with Lisa on the telephone, informing her that his wife has died and that he must pretend to be sad for awhile before seeing her again.

This conversation occurs in another room, while Vicki lays catatonic on the bedroom floor. The problem is this: *this whole sequence is a dream*, so Vicki is asleep conjuring it. In other words, Terry can't possibly be having a conversation with Lisa on the phone, least of all about Vicki's death, in Vicki's dream since Vicki is really just sleeping and not dead. As the movie makes plain, Vicki is unaware her husband is having an affair with his secretary at this point, so why would she dream this?

And if she dreamed knowledge of the affair, why would she not act on this dream-acquired information in real life, instead of gullibly getting herself tricked by Lisa and locked in a coffin in her own living room?

Haunting Fear also veers wildly from one theme to another, without truly coming together. Vicki is suffering from nightmares about premature burial, the movie establishes, and Dr. Carlton suggests this has something to do with her father. It doesn't, however. He's wrong. Karen Black comes in for a cameo as a hypnotist, and "regresses" Vicki to a past life. In that past life, Vicki was a bride buried alive by her jealous husband, and now, in this life, Vicki is coping with knowledge of that previous existence.

Got it? The next plot twist is even more bizarre. Vicki breaks out of her coffin, turns corpse white (is she the living dead now?) and goes at Terry and Lisa with a butcher knife, giggling maniacally. Is this revenge? Or revenge from beyond the grave? The movie doesn't quite make it clear, nor does it let us know what Vicki is going through. She has been transformed into a murderer, going after those who wronged her, but it's impossible to tell if she is just bonkers or now a supernatural avenger. Especially from the *Halloween*-like ending which finds this Bogey-person up and vanishing after committing the crimes.

Jan-Michael Vincent doesn't fare too well in *Haunting Fear* either.

He sits in a car peering at Brinke Stevens for the first forty-minutes, without dialogue, and then plays a character who is either pretending to be a cop, or a dishonest cop. Then, miraculously, he comes in to save the day in the last act. Vincent looks more engaged here than he does in *Ice Cream Man* (1995), but not by much.

Long story short : *Haunting Fear* has got nothing on Edgar Allan Poe. But it's one of the best Fred Olen Ray movies ever made.

Hiruko the Goblin * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kenji Sawada (Hieda Reijorou); Masaki Kuduo (Masuo Yabe); Hideo Moratauai (Watanabe); Megumi Ueno (Tsukishima Reiko).

CREW: Sedic Presents a film by Shinya Tsuka -moto. *Planning:* Koji Tsutsumi. *Story by:* Daijiro Moroboushi. *Produced by:* Troshiaki Nakasawa, Toshiyasu Nakamura, Masamichi Higuchi. *Photography:* Masahiro Kishimoto. *Music by:* Tsut sushi Umegaki. *Executive Producer:* Yasuhiro Hawegawa. *Written and directed by:* Shinya Tsukamoto. *MPAA Rating:* UR. *Running time:* 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Japan, an archaeologist named Hieda (Sawada) uncovers an ancient mound built by worshippers to appease evil spirits. An evil goblin named Hiruko escapes from the mound and begins killing students at a nearby school, including lovely Reiko (Ueno). Hieda teams with a young man, Yabe (Kuduo), whose family has a history of stopping the goblins.

COMMENTARY: The manic, throw-everything-at-the-wall-and-see-what-sticks spirit of Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead 2* (1987) lives on in the thoroughly delightful J-horror *Hiruko the Goblin*, a delirious horror movie that depicts a very weird brand of villain: mobile, spider-legged decapitated human heads with lashing, whip-like tongues (a possible homage to John Carpenter's *The Thing* [1982]). These spidery monsters skitter about, drop from ceilings, land on people's faces and are combated with an aerosol spray (!) and, on one memorable occasion, a chainsaw. It's total anarchy and total fun.

Unlikely partners archaeologist Hieda and schoolboy Yabe fight to halt the rampage of these spidery creatures from the spirit world,

and there's even a touch of human pathos because a school girl Yabe had a crush on, Reiko, transforms into one of the beasts ... and then, eventually, into Yabe's continuous tormentor (Ash and Linda-style).

Yabe dreams of Reiko as normal and beautiful (in a vision of a picnic) but it's an evil trick and Reiko's power is so mesmerizing that she nearly gets the boy to cut off his own head with the aforementioned chainsaw.

In another weird subplot, Yabe is also "scarred" with memory of the souls Hiruko takes. *Literally*. The faces of the goblins victim's are burned into his back in the form of terrible scars, an indication of the boy's destiny as goblin fighter.

Hiruko the Goblin is all about its striking visuals: great, warp-speed "demon-in-flight" POV camerawork plus more decapitated human heads than you can shake a stick at. There's even the expert depiction of an alternate world where the goblins reign in a pit. Yabe encounters his rapidly-transforming father in "this Forbidden Place," and it's a scene that goes from tragic to gruesome to terrifying, as an army of the spider monsters (led by dear old Dad) attack, and our heroes must jump through closing stone doors, Indiana Jones-style, to escape.

By the end of the movie, when Hieda and Yabe finally go their separate ways for the last time, director Tsukamoto's sense of fun even leaves you with a strong—even emotional—impression of their bond. You've participated with these likable characters on a grand adventure, and you don't want it to be over; you don't want them to say goodbye.

Then, in *Hiruko the Goblin's* telling last shot, the camera gazes skyward with anticipation, seeming to indicate that there are more mysteries in Heaven and Earth than are known in our philosophy, an idea the preceding adventure certainly proves.

So many Japanese horror movies, including 1999's impressive *Shikoku*, deal with the conjunction of ancient spiritual beliefs with modern, relatively secular life. *Hiruko the Goblin* adopts the same template, but where *Shikoku* is a sad, atmospheric meditation on death, *Hiruko* is a balls-to-the-wall, gory horror adventure that ends with uplift. Spirits transcend their gobliny traps and move Heavenwards, looking like the watery alien from James Cameron's *Abyss* (1989).

It's all oddly affecting, and effective, a pitchperfect horror movie if you're in the mood for a good, gory time.

The Masque of the Red Death * . (DTV)

Cast and Crew

CAST: Frank Stallone (Duke); Brenda Vaccaro (Elaina); Herbert Lom (Ludwig); Michelle McBride (Rebecca Stephens); Christine Lune (Colette); Lindsay Reardon (Dallon); Christopher D'Ortiz (Dr. Karen); Simon Poland (Max); Fozia Davidson (Kitra); Godfrey Charles (Hans); Andrew Barrett (Jimmy).

CREW: Century Film Corp. Presents a Breton Film Production. *Special Make-up Effects:* Scott Wheeler. *Music:* Coby Recht. *Film Editor:* Jason Krasucki. *Production Designer:* Leith Ridley. *Director of Photography:* Jossie Wern. *Written by:* Michael J. Murray. *Produced by:* Avi Lerner, Harry Alan Towers. *Directed by:* Alan Birkinshaw. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A photographer for *Snoop* magazine, Rebecca (McBride) crashes an exclusive costume party in Bavaria, at the castle of the famous Ludwig (Lom). This dying "star maker" calls the party the "masque of the red death" and devotes the night to "love and deception." His words prove uncannily prophetic, however, as a killer garbed in red mask and cape soon begins to kill the partygoers, including past-her-prime movie star Elaina (Vaccaro) and up-and-comer, Duke (Stallone).

COMMENTARY: Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Masque of the Red Death" first saw publication in 1842, and involved a masquerade party set in the castle of a man named Prospero. His guests attempted to escape a creeping, bloody disease, "red death" and sought futile sanctuary in each of the castle's trademark colored rooms. In the end, control over the disease, and death itself, proved illusory.

Alan Birkinshaw's 1991 film *The Masque of the Red Death* adopts the setting of the Poe short story (a castle hosting a costume party) and nothing else. Instead, this film is a modern-day slasher effort that uses the literary works of Edgar Allan Poe as the organizing principle, the hook on which to hang the bloody tale. For instance, one murder weapon in the film is a swinging "pendulum," from Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum," perched inside a clock.

Early in the movie, the lead character, Rebecca, is actually depicted with a paperback version of a Poe book in the passenger seat of her car, and that visual reference point makes this film an early

brand of 1990s self-reflexive horror. The killer even declares, at one critical juncture, "Let life imitate art for once," an acknowledgement, perhaps, of the interconnection between the works of Poe and the incidents playing out in Ludwig's castle.

A major concern, however, is that the film's action is staged poorly by Birkinshaw. One ostensible jolt near the end, involving the famous cat jump convention, is surely one of the lamest in history (even worse than *The Haunting of Morella's*). You can literally tell that a cat was simply tossed into shot, apparently from a high ladder. Birkinshaw also sabotages whatever momentum the film generates by intercutting the action with bad musical performances (there's a band in the castle, performing at the party).

An exception in terms of staging is the aforementioned pendulum scene. Here, Rebecca (dressed skimpily as a cupid, as throughout the film) attempts to rescue another party-goer who has been locked below the swinging, lowering razor-sharp pendulum of a giant clock. Rebecca does everything in her power to save this victim, putting her hands in the gears, attempting to hold the pendulum stick, tugging at the victim. None of it works, and as the moments tick down to inevitable death, the scene's tension grows exponentially. Rebecca's desperation, the victim's hysteria and the metronome beat of the pendulum create a perfect storm of terror. The punctuation is the film's *coup de grâce*, a rolling, severed head splashed across the castle floor with a grotesque dash of red.

In terms of narrative, *The Masque of the Red Death* ultimately proves inexplicable at its valedictory point. Rebecca has struggled to be a successful photographer, and she alone survives the massacre at Ludwig's castle. What does she do immediately upon exit? She exposes all her film, ruining it! That roll of film would not only grant her (admittedly sensationalistic) fame, but technically, it's evidence now. The act of destroying the film renders Rebecca's entire experience at the party meaningless. Now she doesn't even have a living history of the terror to show for it. What a dishonor to the victims: now there is no evidence of the truth!

Not unexpectedly, Herbert Lom proves a highpoint of the film. He has an important scene, late in the picture during which he discusses his impending death, and how "finality" now stares him in the face. The dialogue, referring to the way that "the clock has a habit of winning" in issues of mortality, is actually powerful and Lom invests the moment with a real sense of pathos. On the one hand, this is terrific. On the other hand, this moment concerning an old man facing his end with dignity and regret only reminds one how shallow and stupid the rest of the film really is by comparison.

In terms of the slasher paradigm, *The Masque of the Red Death* includes several red herrings, including Lom's Ludwig, who may be staging all the murders so that he has a lot of company in death. The movie also features the 1990s cliché of the talking killer; the slasher who wants to stand up and explain everything to his terrorized, surviving would-be victims. Interestingly, this early 1990s thriller uses as homicidal motive the celebrity, tabloid culture, and its habit of creating, then tearing down, movie stars. Here, one character simply cannot take it that she has gone from starring in films to fronting exercise infomercials. Another character, played by Brenda Vaccaro, is bitter that she is past her Hollywood "sell by date" and on the down slope of her career. And then there's Duke, who also has a secret. All these stars have found the dream of Hollywood a nightmare.

Poe did not fare well at all in the 1990s, perhaps because so many filmmakers felt the unnecessary need to update his work. A straight-up adaptation of "The Masque of the Red Death" could have been terrific. But instead of showcasing that symbolic tale of the inevitability of death, this movie instead trots out all the slasher paradigm's oldest tropes. Herbert Lom single-handedly projects the underlying theme of Poe's work, but still, you can't really say with a straight fact that this is Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death."

976- Evil 2: The Astral Factor * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Debbie James (Robin Jamison); Rene Assa (Mr. Grubeck); Pat O'Bryan (Spike); Phil McKeon (Jodie Taylor); Leslie Ryan (Paula); Rod McCary (Dr. Jamison); Paul Coufos (Stone); Karen Mayo-Chandler (Laurie); George Buck Flower (Leonard Turrell); Sigal Diamant (Barmaid); Joy Ballard (Stripper); Yavone Evans (Reporter); Eric Anjou (Detective); Angela Gordon (Cashier); Christopher Garr (Skeech); David Rogge (Keith); Lou Bonacki (Neelan); Chuck Montalbano (Gross); Ace Mask (Lemisch); Monique Gabrielle (Lawlor); Mindy Seeger (Nurse); Paul Hertzberg (Anchorman); Brigitte Nielsen (Lucifer's book store employee).

CREW: Cinetel Films Inc. Presents a film by Jim Wynorski.
Castings: Paul Adler. *Director of Photography:* Zoran Hochstatter. *Film Editor:* Nina Gilberti. *Music:* Chuck Cirino. *Visual Effects:* Apollo, Ltd.

Executive Producer: Lisa M. Hansen. *Written by:* Erick Anjou. *Based on a story by:* Rick Glassman. *Produced by:* Paul Hertzberg. *Directed by:* Jim Wynorski. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The Slate River Serial Killer, actually college dean Mr. Grubeck (Assa) is apprehended by the police and held in custody. A horrorscope number, 976 Evil, however, has endowed the criminal with the power to astrally project his spirit out of confinement. His avatar kills the only witness to his last crime, Leonard Turrell (Flower), and then sets about stalking lovely Robin Jamison (James), a college girl who once worked in his office. A biker named Spike (O'Bryan), who has tangled with 976-EVIL–spawned destruction before, shows up to stop Grubeck and help Robin escape his grasp.

COMMENTARY: *976-Evil* (1989) may just be the last horror movie that ever warranted a sequel. Campy, goofy and lacking in scares, the Robert Englund–directed tale of a devilish "horrorscope" phone line hardly rates as good entertainment, let alone as a genre high-water mark.

Surprisingly, Jim Wynorski's sequel *976-Evil 2: The Astral Factor* is markedly better than its predecessor. Although the rubber-reality nature of the film's villain, a randy college dean named "Grubeck," is not sufficiently explored or defined, the movie does offer a few fun moments.

Foremost among them is a scene, late in the film, involving a young woman flipping TV channels, late night, between *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. Suddenly, the evil Grubeck appears in a commercial for a remote-control called the "Zapo-matic," and goes all Horace Pinker on the damsel-in-distress, zapping her into the black-and-white worlds of these classic old movies.

First the unsuspecting traveler appears in the Capra film, right at the emotional crescendo. But then a little child near the Christmas tree says "every time you hear a bell, a zombie takes us to Hell," and—*boom!*— the 1990s couch potato is transported into the farmhouse of *Night of the Living Dead*.

Surprisingly, both film "worlds" are created by Wynorski with a sense of fidelity to the source material, right down to Johnny's driving glove at the door, a kid with a garden trowel, and blood spatter on the wall. Again, the scene has almost nothing to do with the central plot of *976-Evil 2: The Astral Factor*, but as a stand-alone moment, it's enjoyable.

Another fun moment finds Brigitte Nielsen, Red Sonja herself,

manning a bookstore called Lucifer's. Pat O'Bryan's Spike (a hold-over character from the first film) is there to research astral projection, and Nielsen quips that he reminds her "of a young Freddy Krueger." His rejoinder is that she reminds him of Elvira "on steroids." Between moments like this and the above-noted movie montage, *976-Evil 2* has a lot of goofy fun with its narrative. Eagle-eyed viewers will also find references to Roger "Gorman," Faust, and Joe Bob Briggs.

There's some good stunt-work in *976-Evil 2* as well, and horror legend George "Buck" Flower gets the most substantial role of his career as a witness terrorized by Grubeck. Usually, this interesting screen presence is reduced to a scene or two, extended cameos. But here, his jovial and perpetually boozy persona is put to amiable and good use. His last scene sees him getting pulped by a Mack truck.

On the downside of the equation, a randy college dean makes for a particularly uninteresting rubber reality villain, and his lame astral-projection quips (like "I've been beside myself lately") don't make him any more menacing or charismatic.

The screenplay also doesn't do much to explain the rules of astral projection. Sure, the astral "double" is a reflection of a soul, not a physical body. But why then, can Grubeck—in his spiritual form—drive cars, choke victims, and otherwise interact with manifestations of the substantial, material world?

One might also rightly suspect that Wynorski's heart isn't necessarily in scaring people here when, before the opening credits have even run, he stages a breast-part-of-the-movie moment with a co-ed in the shower.

Finally, in keeping with a 1990s context, this *976-Evil* sequel features a supernatural serial killer and a police procedural subplot. The demonic angles of the phone service are played down, and what you get is the pursuit of a rubber-reality serial killer, much like *The First Power* (1990) or *Fallen* (1998) ... only cheesier.

The People Under the Stairs * * * *

Critical Reception

"... a terrifically effective scare show, a virtuoso work of cinematic terror incorporating superior cinematography and production design, and most important of all, comic relief ... presented as an allegory on the evils of greed, racism and child abuse."—Kevin Thomas, *Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 1991, Calendar, page 6

"... Craven uses the horror genre to attack the complacency of the Reagan–Bush era, unashamedly identifying with the forgotten, the homeless, the disenfranchised."—Kim Newman, *Sight and Sound*, February 1992, page 54

"Craven's politically-charged plot takes dead aim at the racial divisiveness and class warfare of the Reagan '80s. It is also a fairly cynical attempt to pander to the inner city black audiences, always core devotees of exploitation horror films."—Thomas Doherty, *Cinefantastique*, April 1992, page 59

"An underrated little Wes Craven chestnut, with some genuine scares and a most unorthodox plot. We also get a young, unknown Ving Rhames and the kid from Michael Jackson's *Moonwalker*. What more can you ask?"—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Brandon Adams (Fool); Everett McGill (Man); Wendy Robie (Woman); A.J. Langer (Alice); Ving Rhames (LeRoy); Sean Whalen (Roach); Bill Cobbs (Grandpa Booker); Kelly Jo Minter (Ruby); Jeremy Roberts (Spenser); Conni Marie Brazelton (Mary); Joshua Cox (Young Cop); John Hostetter (Veteran Cop); John Mahon (Police Sergeant); Theresa Velarde (Social Worker); George R. Parker (Attic Cop); Yan Birch (Stairmaster); Wayne Daniels (Stairperson 1); Michael Koeplow (Stairperson Two).

CREW: A Universal Pictures Release of an Alive Films production, a Wes Craven film. *Casting:* Eileen Knight. *Costume*

Designer: Ileana Meltzer. *Production Designer:* Bryan Jones. *Music:* Don Peake. *Film Editor:* James Coblentz. *Director of Photography:* Sandy Sissel. *Executive Producers:* Shep Gordon, Wes Craven. *Produced by:* Marianne Maddalena, Stuart M. Besser. *Written and directed by:* Wes Craven. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: With his mother sick and in need of an operation, young Fool (Adams), an African American living in poverty, resorts to burglary. With the help of an adult, LeRoy (Rhames), he breaks into the secure home of the richest people in the neighborhood, his greedy white landlords, Man (McGill) and Woman (Robie). Once inside, however, Fool becomes trapped and encounters many of the denizens, the so-called "children" of the perverted couple, including the lovely Alice (Langer), the defiant Roach (Whalen) and a whole bevy of deformed, albino teens who have been relegated to a life under the stairs. After engineering an escape, Fool courageously returns to the landlords' house to rescue Alice and strike a blow for an exploited community.

COMMENTARY: The horror film's Horatio Alger, Wes Craven explores an American "underclass" and issues surrounding race in *The People Under the Stairs*, a frightfully well-conceived and executed horror flick.

The film's production designer, Bryan Jones, has crafted a house that is a real chamber of horrors and reflects thematically the idea of a multi-tiered American class system, where the rich on "top" live in luxury and affluence, and those at the bottom subside on the "trickle down," the leftovers.

Filled with dead-ends, traps and deadly reverses, this house is the nemesis of the film's young protagonist, Fool (Brandon Adams), as much as its clearly-crazy owners, who movie critic David Denby explicitly compared in his original review to Ron and Nancy Reagan. With its labyrinthine twists and turns, this crazy house (lovely surface, throbbing underneath) proves the living embodiment of the landlords' twisted psyches.

The house, an important character in the film, is captured expertly by the talented Craven and his intrepid director of photography Sandi Sissel, who also shot Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* (1988), another film about children living in poverty. The camera in this film is often positioned above eye level and points down towards the corners of long hallways or staircases, thereby capturing the aggressive action, but also making star Adams appear even smaller than normal amidst the detritus of the imposing interior.

Many shots inside the house are also lensed from a cockeyed

angle, which—while not extreme or overdone—indicates the unsettling, off-kilter aspect of this mansion.



He could stand to get a little sun. A cellar-dweller from Wes Craven's *The People Under the Stairs* (1991).

For his dynamic chases behind the walls, Craven utilizes tracking shots, P.O.V sequences and tight framing to heighten suspense. Accordingly, the audience feels Fool's entrapment and breathes a sigh of relief when finally, after the film's manic first hour, he escapes to the outside world once more. Since *The People Under the Stairs* takes place mostly in one claustrophobic locale and relentlessly diagrams that cloistered terrain, that freaky inner space, it remains, to a large extent, Craven's most cohesive work up till this point.

In the horror genre, skilled directors find the sweet spot when they pinpoint a "film grammar" form that reflects their choice of narrative content, and that is very much what occurs with Craven here. The screenplay comments caustically on the degradation of the family, the severing of the bonds of community, yuppie values, and even the way that those who lack empathy, decency and common humanity utilize religion to serve their own ends. Like Craven's landmark *The Hills Have Eyes*, the film is also a clash between the "haves" and the "have nots," only here they are literally sharing one house (one nation, under God?).

The reversal on the premise of the earlier film is that this time it is the have-nots who are the heroes, and the "haves" who have turned

crazy. Like an exaggerated version of the "white bread" Carters in *Hills*, the white antagonists of *The People Under the Stairs* are racists who call black people "niggers" and plan to evict them from their overpriced ghetto so they can bring in "clean" people. But unlike the Carters, the landlords here are clearly nuts, and evil.

What director Craven apparently sees as the root cause of this shift to insanity is the Reagan, yuppified decade of the 1980s, the era between *The Hills Have Eyes* and *The People Under the Stairs*. Therefore, as scholar Thomas Doherty wrote in *Cinefantastique*, Craven takes "dead aim" at the hallmarks of the conservative political revolution: racial divisiveness, evident in the widely-repeated Reagan myth of the "welfare queen" bilking the system and living high off the hog, the yuppie mentality (me, me, me), and right-wing Christian piousness, which championed traditional values at the expense of actually living the principles of Christ, namely helping those in poverty.

As is the case in such efforts as *Tales from the Hood* (1995), racism is the issue roiling *People Under the Stairs*. Not only does the evil white family hurl racial epithets at black people with alarming regularity, it actively oppresses the African American community. The evil landlords own not only the ghetto apartment buildings which have become crack houses where rabid dogs fight over scraps of red meat, but the local liquor store too. Thus they feed the community's addictions and get rich doing so. Furthermore, they actually take all the money out of the ghetto by charging extravagant rent.



Roach (Sean Whalen) smiles in *The People Under the Stairs*.

In the first portion of the film, Craven powerfully documents Fool's sense of desperation. His only opportunity to save his mother's life is in joining small-time crook Leroy in a robbery. Ironically, Fool's brother Washington (a loaded choice in name) is already in jail, having trying to put "food on the table" through a similar crime. From such examples, Craven draws the conclusion that inner city crime is a result of white wealth rather than, necessarily, a consequence of those in the black community. *They are just doing what it takes to survive* since the money of the Reagan revolution never "trickled down" to them.

Instead, the money stopped in the hands of the wealthy who were too selfish to share. Instead of passing through the money to community businesses, they've "re-invested" for selfish gain. They bought liquor stores and apartment buildings, and lined their pockets.

As *The People Under the Stairs* points out, the gap between the rich and the poor widened at the end of the 1980s because of Reaganomics. Wendy Robie's character remarks at one point that there "is no community here," an acknowledgement that the out-for-myself yuppie ethos has replaced the once commonly-held belief in helping

neighbors in need.

The yuppie mentality is thus lampooned in *The People Under the Stairs*. The landlords only care about money, and they murder, evict, steal, collect and horde to gain more. Yet the accumulation of all this wealth does them no real service whatsoever. They merely throw sacks of cash and gold into their basement. The money that was supposed to trickle down has been intercepted, and it is not until Fool "liberates" it, and wealth re-distribution occurs, that justice also comes.

Similarly, the nutty landlord couple in *The People Under the Stairs* share other concerns of "respectable" whites in America. The man and the woman comment on crime that is "out of control" in their neighborhood, when their own materialism is apparently the root source of the urban crime. Rather than address the behavior that leads to criminal activity, the demented family puts bars and padlocks on their doors and windows. They hide behind security systems and electrified doors. But the truth of the matter is that what lurks within their house is far worse than anything brought by so-called "criminals."



Wes Craven proved himself one of the busiest and most successful horror directors of the 1990s.

The People Under the Stairs is also canny in the way it exposes the evil landlords as hypocrites who use Christianity for perverted ends. These are child abusers, pure and simple, and they justify physical

cruelty with Scripture. "If thine eye offends thee, pluck it out," represents their *modus operandi*. If the children do something wrong, the adults literally pluck out—cutting off—the parts that offend them.

Similarly, Robie's character refers to Alice as a "little Judas" when the girl betrays her for Fool, thus putting herself on the same level as Christ. The couple is also heard praying near the climax of the film, though with a strange variation on an old refrain. With all reverence, the duo solemnly declares, "if I should kill before I wake."

The religious imagery infiltrates every aspect of this couple's bizarre lifestyle. When the twisted mom throws Alice into the scalding water of the bathtub, she notes that "the fires of Hell are hotter." When these antagonists dislike anyone, whether it be black people, police, social workers or children, they align themselves with the Lord (and thus morality) by speaking "May they burn in Hell!" They believe they are morally superior to others because they are Christians, and therefore God's chosen, when in fact they are the most immoral and selfish people in the neighborhood.

At one point in the film, Craven depicts the abandoned, physically-abused, sunlight-deprived children of the landlords watching a small television set in the basement. On TV, Gulf War footage plays endlessly. By affording a clear view of Baghdad's bombing in green-hued night vision, Craven makes a connection between the middle class of America and the 1991 foreign entanglement.

America wages war outside our borders, but the real horror is occurring inside our country. That is what needs to be addressed; this house (the landlord's house and America itself) needs to be put in order. In Baghdad, our nation fights so that consumers might save a nickel at the gas pumps, and our expensive technology levels an enemy city. By showcasing this footage in this context, however, Craven reminds audience that our money is not going to the ghetto or our educational system, but rather to missiles and planes and tanks so that our pocketbooks will be protected from economic hardship.

Although *The People Under the Stairs* is packed with much social commentary, and a heavy identification for society's downtrodden (hence the comparison of Craven to Alger), there is nothing heavy-handed or preachy about this movie. Quite the opposite is true. The performances by McGill and Robie are deliciously malevolent, the chases are tense and frightening, and the fairy tale ending, with wealth re-distributed to the poor, is delightful. At the conclusion of the film, a community stands as one to stop greedy landlords once and for all and Craven's message is evident.

Working together for a common cause instead of lining one's own wallet, can literally pay dividends.

Popcorn * * 1/2

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jill Schoelen (Maggie); Tom Villard (Toby D'Amato); Dee Wallace-Stone (Suzanne); Derek Rydell (Mark); Malcolm Danare (Bud); Elliott Hurst (Leon); Ivette Soler (Joannie); Freddie Marie Simpson (Tina); Kelly Jo Minter (Cheryl); Karen Witter (Joy); Ray Walston (Dr. Mnesyne); Tony Roberts (Mr. Davis); Scott Thompson (Bearded Guy); Will Knickerbocker (Landlord); Ethan Ormsby (Two-Headed Patron).

CREW: Movie Partners in association with Century Films presents *Popcorn*. *Casting:* Joseph D'Agosta. *Production Designer:* Peter Murton. *Music:* Paul J. Zaza. *Director of Photography:* Ronnie Taylor. *Film Editor:* Stan Cole. *Executive Producers:* Howard Baldwin, Karl Hendrickson, Howard Hurst. *Produced by:* Ashok Amritaj, Gary Goch, Torben Johnke. *Story by:* Mitchell Smith. *Written by:* Tod Hackett. *Directed by:* Mark Herrier. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: To get the university's fledgling film department on the map, film professor Mr. Davis (Roberts) and his class decide to stage an all-night horror-thon celebration at the rundown old movie palace, Dreamland. There, they fix the place up with the help of movie memorabilia man Dr. Mnesyne (Walston) and prepare to show three horrors with interesting promotional gimmicks: *Mosquito* (in 3-D), *The Attack of the Amazing Electrified Man* (in Shock-O-Scope) and the Japanese film *The Stench* (in Aroma-rama). But one of the students, aspiring film writer Maggie (Schoelen), becomes obsessed with another cult film, called *Possessor*, made in the 1960s. She learns that the man who created it, Gates, went on to murder his family on stage in a movie theater in Dreamland. Now, Maggie dreams of the evil Gates and is convinced that he is returning for her. On the night of the horrorthon at Dreamland, a bogeyman shows up bearing a vendetta against Maggie and her friends, but his identity is not what she expected.

COMMENTARY: *Popcorn* is really two movies. One is smart and worthwhile: a horror-comedy movie-within-a-movie that loves cinema

history, and in particular, horror cinema history. In selfreflexively gazing back at genre conventions and gimmickry, it actually, in very post-modern fashion, anticipates such nineties films as Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996).

The other movie in *Popcorn* is a blow-by-blow, category-by-category revival of the 1980s slasher movie paradigm. Ultimately, this story proves far less appealing than the other story in *Popcorn*: shot with nary a whit of the ingenuity or cleverness the movie-within-a-movie sequences possess. The film's schizophrenic nature could be the result of the fact that the film, shot entirely in Jamaica, had two directors, though just one is credited.

Alan Ormsby was reputedly fired from the production after shooting *Popcorn's* sequences involving the fictional "old horror movies": *Mosquito*, *The Attack of the Amazing Electrified Man*, and *The Stench*. Mike Herrier directs the story set in the present, the planning and execution of an all-night "horrorthon" and a killer's elaborate plan for revenge.

In one sense, the film unexpectedly benefits from two helmers: the film-within-a-film sequences definitely look like the product of a second creative mind, and that makes them seem more realistic as artifacts of the 1950s. On the other hand, the story in the present is a dead duck. It just lies there and required a surer, wittier hand on the wheel.

The real joy inherent in *Popcorn* involves the homage to low-budget horror films of the 1950s, the era in which filmmaker William Castle (1917– 1977) sought to spice up his genre productions with atmospheric gimmicks for theater patrons. This was the era of 3-D horrors such as *House of Wax* (1953) and *It Came from Outer Space* (1953), but also the heyday of Castle inspirations like "Freak Breaks," "Illusion-O" and more.

In *Popcorn*, the first film shown at the Dreamland Theatre is *Mosquito*, a 1950s Jack Arnold– styled piece, concerning mosquitoes in the desert grown to monstrous size after Army A-bomb tests. Part *Them!* (1954), part *The Deadly Mantis* (1957), the mock film features all the clichés of the genre, from a dedicated lady scientist, to the decision to drop an A-Bomb on the giant bugs, to the desert locale (see: *Tremors* [1990]). But in keeping with the spirit of Castle, *Popcorn's Mosquito* also features a variation on "Emergo," the Castle technique used in *House on Haunted Hill* (1959), which saw an inflatable, glow-in-the-dark skeleton slide down a rope above surprised theater-goers. In *Mosquito*, a very heavy (and deadly) mosquito mock-up floats over the Dreamland auditorium, and is

responsible for at least two kills in the story.

The second movie-within-a-movie is a sort of classic "worm turns" picture of the Bert I. Gordon variety, *The Attack of the Amazing Electrified Man*. In title, it reflects *The Amazing Colossal Man*, and in visualization, it looks like a lost William Cameron Menzies classic, all German Expressionism, exaggerated shadows and menacing low-angles. The Castle-esque gimmick deployed in this film is "Shock-O-Scope," a variation on "Percepto," which was utilized in the 1959 film, *The Tangler*. Percepto delivered a mild electric jolt to theater-goers, and that's exactly what Shock-O-Scope does in *Popcorn*.

A third film, a dubbed Japanese affair called *The Stench*, employs Aroma-Rama, a variation of Smell-O-Vision (not a Castle creation), a method by which to pipe odors into a movie auditorium. Smell-O-Vision was used in conjunction with the 1960 movie, *Scent of a Mystery*, but never truly functioned properly, with scents ill-timed with the action on screen.

Finally, *Popcorn* also features a weird, Mansonoid film called *Possessor*, which is one part snuff film, one part psychedelic, head film and is lensed mostly in extreme close-ups. As it should be, it's extremely trippy.

Each of these movie-within-a-movies is lensed in its own appropriate-to-the-age visual style and each is a lot of fun. These clips aren't made as campy "jokes," but played straight, as they should be. If you love horror movie history, you'll likely want to forget about the rest of *Popcorn* and just enjoy the horrorthon.

The overarching plot of *Popcorn* is pure slasher movie paradigm. The organizing principle, the hook on which the movie hangs—is movie magic and gimmickry, à la Castle. The film's villain, for instance, wears different prosthetic make-ups to appear as his victims, and his ultimate goal is to create the equivalent of a live snuff performance.

The murders in this slasher-style story involve the use of the Emergo Mosquito (which has a nasty stinger), and the Percepto Electrocuter. The reason behind the killer's anger is *the crime in the past, the transgression*. In particular, his mother was murdered during a showing of *Possessor* years earlier, and in the same incident, his faced was literally burned off.

The film also incorporates a final girl, Maggie, who contextualizes her life entirely in terms of movies. "It's not a screenplay I've been writing: it's my life!" she declares (presaging Heather Langenkamp's similarly Pirandellian declaration in *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*). "You were like Indiana Jones," she tells her

heroic boyfriend after the finale, and so on. Even the film's talking killer, gets into the rat-a-tat of movie-speak. "I'm so glad I cast you in the part," he tells Maggie.

Popcorn also trots out a red herring, in this case the maker of *Possessor*, the madman Laynard Gates, and in keeping with the movie's organizing principle, he too seems movie-obsessed. The film also includes the *veneer of respectability/useless authority* element of the paradigm (think Donald Pleasence in *Halloween*, or Glenn Ford in *Happy Birthday to Me*), by featuring genre greats (and adults) Dee Wallace-Stone and Ray Walston in small but critical roles.

The setting, of course, is also connected deliberately with movies: an old movie theater, and one that features visible posters for such efforts as *The Incredible Melting Man* (1977) and *The Tinger*.

But here's the thing: unlike other films of the slasher paradigm revival (*Scream*, *I Know What You Did Last Summer*), *Popcorn* plays these elements of the story without any recognition that they too come from a beloved period of horror cinema. In other words, *Popcorn* is smart enough to contextualize older horror movies, but not smart enough to contextualize the most popular format of the last decade, the 1980s. It scores points for pointing to the self-reflexive angle that dominates the 1990s in movies as diverse as *The Dark Half*, *In the Mouth of Madness*, *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* and *Scream*, but not for re-contextualizing the slasher movie for a new decade.

An example involves the treatment of the film's central teens. Although they smartly are aware of all movie history, apparently they are unrelentingly dumb in applying that knowledge to their own situation in the movie theater. At one point, *Popcorn's* killer physically manipulates a female movie usher like a marionette, and Maggie and her boyfriend have a fairly long conversation with her, all while she jerks around like a puppet. They don't evidence any suspicion over this, and so the killer's plans come to fruition.

Part of the slasher paradigm revival involves heightened character awareness that they are in a horror movie situation and therefore must think on their feet. *Popcorn* never gets to that idea ... the characters march along in lockstep with the killer's plan, never managing to put up much resistance.

Popcorn also doesn't explain one of its crucial early scenes. Maggie's Mom, Suzanne (Dee Wallace-Stone), goes to the Dreamland with a gun in hand because she believes Lanyard Gates has returned from the dead. Outside the theater, the evil guru bewitches her, in a sense, and the letters on the Marquee above re-form before our eyes to spell the word "Possessor." Then the letters drop off the marquee

before her and land at her feet.

The only problem with this is that Lanyard is not returning from the grave—he's a red herring. So how does the reality-based real killer manage to alter the shape of those letters and make them pop off the marquee? There's no way, clearly. The movie cheats, so we think that Lanyard is some kind of supernatural avenger. But he isn't so this scene doesn't make sense. That's just sloppy.

Popcorn is a movie that loves movie. It even comments amusingly on the era of movie palaces, and the 1990s era of "omni-multi-whatchu-maplexes." It's a movie that a horror fan will want more than anything to admire and champion. And yet, in the final analysis, it suffers from that fatal sense of schizophrenia: it is both brilliant and stupid at the same time. In the end, stupid finally wins out because the film doesn't re-purpose its slasher paradigm central narrative for the new decade of snark and post-modernism. The characters are all dumb as stumps.

Even as they are trapped in a movie theatre, watching movies, and being hunted by a killer under the auspices of movie magic, they don't begin to think like "movie" characters. How dense can you be?

Puppet Master 2 (a.k.a. Puppet Master 2: His Unholy Creations) * * (DTV)

Cast and Crew

CAST: Elizabeth Maclellan (Carolyn Bramwell/ Elsa); Collin Bernsen (Michael Kenney); Gregory Webb (Patrick Bramwell); Charlie Spradling (Wanda); Steve Welles (Andre Toulon); Jeff Weston (Lance); Ivan J. Rado (Calvo Merchant); Sage Allen (Martha); George "Buck" Flower (Matthew); Nita Talbot (Camille).

CREW: Full Moon Entertainment presents a David Allen film.
Casting: Robert McDonald, Perry Bullington. *Production Designer:* Kathleen Gates. *Puppet Effects:* David Allen Productions. *Special Make-up Effects:* David Barton. *Music:* Richard Band. *Film Editors:* Bert Glatstein, Peter Teschner. *Director of Photography:* Thomas F. Denove. *Executive Producer:* Charles Band. *Story by:* Charles Band. *Written by:* David Pabian. *Produced by:* David De Coteau, John Schouweiler. *Directed by:* David Allen. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of intrepid government experts in the paranormal take up an investigation of the abandoned hotel on Scarab Hill. The investigators are unaware, however, that in the next door cemetery, several animated puppets (including Pinhead, Blade and, Tunneler) have resurrected their dead master, Andre Toulon (Welles). Toulon comes to believe that one of the investigators, the red-headed and lovely Carolyn (Maclellan), is actually the reincarnation of his lost love, Elsa, and wants to place both his soul and hers inside immortal puppet bodies. Meanwhile, Toulon also creates a new puppet with a flame thrower named Torch, and sets him loose to destroy two pesky locals (Flower, Allen).

COMMENTARY: Real-life puppet master and genre legend Dave Allen takes the reins for *Puppet Master 2*, an average sequel to the low-budget, 1989 hit from director David Schmoeller.

As is the case in the previous entry, *Puppet Master 2* is at its best simply showcasing the magnificent creations of Toulon (and in real life, Allen): monstrous little puppets with unusual and disgusting ways of killing the relatively undistinguished human cast members.

Here, the movie's undeniable bright spot is a new puppet named Torch who, in one splendidly politically incorrect sequence, utilizes his flamethrower/hand extension to torch an obnoxious child who has been cruel to his G.I. Joe figures.

David Allen's puppets are really extraordinary in this film. There's an amazing shot of the vicious and authentically scary puppet called Blade threatening one victim on her bed, then leaping down, landing on the floor and lunging suddenly towards the camera. The complicated sequence is not vetted with computers nor, apparently, with wires, at least not visible ones. The little bugger actually looks like he's alive and ambulatory, which is certainly nightmare provoking.

Another gruesome moment involves Tunneler boring bloodily into the head of a victim with his corkscrew/drill head attachment. Such inventive kills are really the *raison d'être* for this film, and they don't disappoint.

Another fun horror scene in *Puppet Master 2* finds the puppets waging all-out war against an obese, unpleasant local, Martha, played by Sage Allen, inside a darkened cabin. Martha tosses one of the puppets into her wood-burning stove, and then—after declaring "You may have the powers of Hell on your side, but you don't know who you're dealing with!"—gets burned herself by the newly-arrived Torch.

Outside such gory and impressive special effects moments and

confrontations, however, there's not much in meaningful narrative to hang onto in *Puppet Master 2*. It's laughable and strange, for instance, that none of the government investigators at first suspect that anything is up with Toulon, a man who appears in an abandoned hotel wearing Invisible Man-style goggles, not to mention concealing bandages around his entire head.

One might think his unusual appearance would raise a few suspicions before the third act revelation that he's Toulon.

The film's final scene—with the puppets riding in a Volkswagen van, their destination a home for institutionalized delinquents—is also a risible set-up for a sequel and not a very effective end to the movie, especially because the next film in the franchise ignores the ham-handed set-up in favor of a new and more effective approach. It would have been preferable, perhaps, simply to end this sequel with the puppets turning on their master, Toulon, who has betrayed them by taking their magical "juice" and planning to use it for himself and Carolyn/Elsa. The children-turning-against-the-father convention may be a cliché, but it offers more satisfactory closure than a puppet road trip and the closing line, "We have children to enchant."

After *Puppet Master 2*, a noticeable and welcome shift occurs in the portrayal of Toulon's puppets. They become, essentially, heroic bad guys—battling worse Nazis and evil demons, instead of merely servants. That approach seems preferable to the one used here, *Friday the 13th* with puppets ... which is just an excuse for those wonderful puppets to do their bloody but impressive thing.

***Puppet Master 3: Toulon's Revenge* * * * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Guy Rolfe (Andre Toulon); Sarah Douglas (Elsa); Richard Lynch (Kraus); Ian Abercrombie (Dr. Hess); Walter Gotell (General Mueller); Kristopher Logan (Lt. Eric Stein); Aron Eisenberg (Peter Hurtz); Michelle Bauer (Lili).

CREW: Full Moon Entertainment presents a film by David De Coteau. *Casting:* Robert McDonald,

Perry Bullington. *Production Designer:* Billy Jett. *Puppet Effects:* David Allen Productions. *Special Make-up Effects:* David Barton. *Music:* Richard Band. *Film Editor:* Carol Oblath. *Director of Photography:*

Adolfo Bartoli. *Executive Producer*: Charles Band. *Story by*: Charles Band. *Written by*: C. Courtney Joyner. *Produced by*: David De Coteau, John Schouweiler. *Directed by*: David De Coteau. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Berlin in 1941, puppet master Andre Toulon (Rolfe) and his beloved wife Elsa (Douglas) stage puppet shows satirizing Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, but a German soldier catches wind of them. A cruel Gestapo officer, Kraus (Lynch) kills Elsa and attempts to capture Toulon, so that the Nazi can learn the secret of animating life for the Führer, and contribute to Dr. Hess's (Abercrombie) zombie soldier program. Toulon escapes from custody and, using puppets Six-Shooter, Blade, Pinhead, and Tunneler, exacts brutal revenge on Kraus and the Nazis.

COMMENTARY: Of all the *Puppet Master* movies, *Toulon's Revenge* is the best. It's not a great film, but one clever idea— *a role reversal*— grants the direct-to-video series new life and an injection of much-needed energy. The film is also lucky to feature a stable of good B movie actors in the leading roles, led by Guy Rolfe as Toulon and the ubiquitous Richard Lynch as the villainous Kraus. Even the great Sarah Douglas (*Superman II* [1981]) is on hand, if woefully underutilized in the brief but critical role of Toulon's doomed wife, Elsa.

The idea that animates *Toulon's Revenge* is that the ambulatory puppets (Blade, Pinhead, etc.) are not strictly evil, and in this film actually combat the Nazis in 1941 Berlin. Toulon has also been re-conceived as a sympathetic hero, and this is a stroke of creativity, especially when it would have been easy merely to rehash previous entries. But instead of having the puppets murder uninteresting, interchangeable adults with bad 90s hair, who inevitably strip and have sex, this movie thrives on a kind of "it takes evil to fight evil" basis—puppets vs. fascists—and that imaginative angle makes the entire enterprise much livelier.

The danger inherent in the earlier *Puppet Master* films was simply that they would become poor *Friday the 13th* movies, only with puppets doing the killing. This movie's creativity eliminates that paradigm and as a consequence, the audience actively gets behind the puppets as they seek revenge against the men who killed Elsa. The film's final scene is an effective bit of work too, depicting in gory terms how the puppets, led by Blade, string up Kraus like a puppet himself ... and then "pull his strings" to kill him.

Every *Puppet Master* introduces a new puppet belonging to

Toulon, and this film does

better than that. It introduces Six Shooter, but also reveals the origin of Blade, a white-faced, highcheek creation that always resembled Richard Lynch anyway. Now, according to the film, the little doll was built as a double of the evil Nazi Kraus ... *played here by none-other than Richard Lynch*. This is perfect.

Puppet Master 3: Toulon's Revenge goes deeper than the other films in the franchise by explaining the history of the puppets too. We learn, for instance, that these creatures are actually former humans, whose souls have been moved into puppet bodies.

The movie also goes a long way towards establishing the puppet's affection for and loyalty to Toulon, though that is undercut, somewhat, by the plot of the previous entry, *Puppet Master 2*. Finally, the film even voices a subtle argument about censorship in the age of political correctness. "Political satire marks a healthy society," Toulon suggests to Nazi oppressors, though they don't see it quite that way.

The popular 1990s trope "science run amok" is also present here, with the Nazis hoping to learn the secrets of the injection that grants life to the inanimate. In this case, Hitler wants an army of zombies to fight on the Russian front, and a scientist played by Ian Abercrombie hopes to oblige. Although this could be very clichéd and stilted in presentation, Abercrombie does well with his role and, once more, the script actually provides a degree of nuance: Hess is not a black-hat, but a man hoping to further the boundaries of man's knowledge. He sees Toulon not as an enemy or a man to exploit, but as an instructor who can teach him new things.

Of course, *Puppet Master 3: Toulon's Revenge* isn't supposed to be Shakespeare, and the puppet attack sequences are its bread and butter. Six-Shooter takes out Walter Gotell's Nazi general at a brothel, and the Leech Women gets to bleed the soldier who betrayed Toulon. These scenes work well and seeing the puppets on the side of justice proves almost doubly as effective.

The next film in the franchise, *Puppet Master 4: The Demon*, worked hard to build on the successes of this entry but was ultimately let down by a weak cast. With Ian Abercrombie, Sarah Douglas, Aron Eisenberg (*Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* [1993–1999]), Richard Lynch and Guy Rolfe appearing here, *Curse of Toulon* doesn't share that problem.

***The Reflecting Skin* * * * ***

CAST: Viggo Mortensen (Cameron Dove); Lindsay Duncan (Dolphin Blue); Jeremy Cooper (Seth Dove); Sheila Muse (Ruth Dove); Duncan Fraser (Luke Dove); David Longworth (Joshua); Robert Koons (Sheriff Tucker); David Bloom (Deputy); Evan Hall (Kim); Cody Lucas Wilbee (Eben); Sherrie Bie (Casey); Jason Wolfe (Cadillac Driver); Dean Hess (Passenger).

CREW: Miramax Films, British Screen, BBC Films and Zenith Present a Fugitive Features Production, a film by Philip Ridley. *Film Editor:* Scott Thomas. *Music:* Nick Bucat. *Director of Photography:* Dick Pope. *Executive Producer:* Jim Beach. *Art Director:* Rick Roberts. *Co-Producer:* Di Roberts. *Produced by:* Dominic Anciano, Ray Burdis. *Written and directed by:* Philip Ridley. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After World War II, a boy named Seth Dove (Cooper) lives a bleak existence in a mid-western Prairie town. At least, that is, until he befriends a widower named Dolphin Blue (Duncan), a woman he believes to be a vampire. A series of tragedies occur around Seth, including the murder of two of his young friends and the suicide of his father. His brother Cameron (Mortensen) returns from the Pacific Theater and falls in love with Dolphin, even over Seth's warning and objections. Meanwhile, a mysterious black Cadillac keeps showing up on the side of the dusty roads. Whenever it appears, someone dies.

COMMENTARY: Every now and then a movie catches you by surprise even as you're experiencing it. Sometimes, a movie even seems to coalesce suddenly before your very eyes (and in your heart). And as it reaches that final, human crescendo, you're left unexpectedly breathless, overcome emotionally by the movie's impact.

Such a movie is Philip Ridley's bizarre 1991 effort, *The Reflecting Skin*. It's not an easy film to watch and often it has been attacked for visual and thematic elements that some critics perceive as pretentious. Most often, *The Reflecting Skin* is compared with David Lynch's films, and has even been termed "Blue Velvet with Children" on occasion.

Many of the comparisons to Lynch's work are apt, but *The Reflecting Skin* is no mere imitator. Instead, the film is legitimately haunting and affecting, and it captures the essence of childhood: the anticipation, the boredom, the excitement ... the terror. Even the inescapable end of childhood: the death of innocence.

Set in a lonely prairie town in post World War II Idaho, *The Reflecting Skin* tells the story of a boy named Seth Dove (Jeremy

Cooper). He's going to be nine years old soon, and life is strange and mysterious. For one thing, Seth's mother is brutal in her punishments (she force feeds Seth water until his bladder is literally ready to burst). For another thing, there's a strange but lovely new neighbor in town, the Widow Dolphin Blue (Lindsay Duncan). After reading a comic book called "Vampire Blood" Seth becomes convinced that she's actually a vampire. Dolphin even confides in the boy, strangely, that she's two hundred years old.

But then a mysterious black Cadillac begins haunting the wind-swept, endless country roads, and Seth's young friends begin to turn up dead ... murdered. Seth's father, a closeted, repressed gay who was once caught kissing a seventeen-yearold boy, is linked to the crimes because of his past history, branded a pedophile by the police, and soon commits suicide by swallowing gasoline and immolating himself. Life goes on for Seth and the murders continue as well, exonerating his father, but too late.

Seth's older brother, the handsome Cameron (Viggo Mortenson), returns home from the war, the Pacific Theater specifically, to care for the troubled Dove family. This sensitive veteran (who has witnessed atrocities) promptly falls in love with the Widow Dolphin Blue. Seth tries to warn his brother about her: she's a vampire and will kill him. Bafflingly, Cameron is already losing his hair, and his gums have begun to bleed, signs Seth interprets to mean he is under Dolphin's vampiric spell.

Cameron can't be dissuaded in his passion for Dolphin. He and the Widow Dolphin Blue plan to escape the isolation of the prairie town, and Seth becomes ever more desperate to stop their flight from his life. But then the black Cadillac returns and claims one final victim.

This time, because of the identity of that corpse, Seth can't deny "reality." There are no easy vampire myths to hide behind, no more easily explainable monsters. Alone, he runs into a golden wheat field and screams at the blue, wideopen sky. Innocence is hell, and the loss of innocence is hell.

This description of the film only covers a portion of *Reflecting Skin's* unusual tapestry. I didn't mention the aborted fetus that Seth discovers and mistakes for an angel. I didn't mention the man in the eye patch, or the fact that all the corpses "returned" by the mysterious black Cadillac are strangely immaculate ... ivory white but with no sign of wounds. It's all very strange.

On first glimpse, Seth seems to live a beautiful, repetitive life. He plays among golden wheat fields, draped in an American flag,

spending his days with his friends. At one point, Ridley orchestrates a low-angle shot of Seth running towards the camera, through the fields, the sky unmoving and permanent behind him. The effect of the shot is that Seth appears to be running as fast as he can, but going nowhere. It's a perfect metaphor for childhood as it is lived: it seems to last forever, all one giant game.

But this perfect childhood existence is punctured by all the inexplicable invasions from adulthood. Seth's Mother and Father are awash in secrets—alienated and judgmental. And Dolphin Blue sits by herself in her lonely house surrounded by artifacts belonging to her dead husband, even strands of his hair. "Nothing but dreams and decay," she tells the boy with glazed indifference. Then, Seth and his friends catch Dolphin masturbating, another strange, inexplicable "adult" thing.

As the movie points out with images, Seth attempts to process the murders, the mayhem, the sorrow and secrets of the adult universe in a way a child legitimately would. Dolphin affects him in a strange way—disturbs his young mind—and so he interprets the unfamiliar in a familiar way: as a vampire.

When this creature of the night threatens to "steal" his brother, that interpretation becomes all the more powerful. Seth must save his brother from an imaginary monster, a phantasm of youth ... a fairy tale. But a vampire, at least, is something that a child can comprehend. Vampires have rules, and there are ways to kill vampires. Real life isn't like that.

Then, in a scorching, heart-wrenching moment, Seth's world crumbles around him. He is forced, by circumstance and violence, to learn that there are no vampires. This discovery, leading up to the film's shattering climax, totally annihilates what remains of his innocent perception. At the end, there are no monsters, just other people.

So—cast in shadow and silhouette—Seth weeps and screams at his involuntary initiation into adulthood. This valedictory shot—a lonely boy crying heavenward in a pastoral setting—has been charged as clichéd or pretentious by some, but that's a cynical and unsentimental reading of an artistic composition. The final shot is a primal scream raging against being forced to grow up. Seth's realization that he has been thrust into a world without monsters and therefore without magic is utterly heart-rending, especially if you have ever observed up close the innocence and wonder of a trusting, believing child.

At one point in *The Reflecting Skin*, the Widow Dolphin Blue

informs Seth that childhood is a nightmare and that "innocence is hell." But she goes on to tell him that "it only gets worse." She enunciates at length the humiliations and degradations of growing old. Losing hair, losing memory, succumbing to arthritis, the onset of senile dementia, and more. She ends the litany with a warning: "Just pray you have someone to love you."

Seth doesn't understand her warning at the time it is delivered. In the magical cocoon of childhood, he can invent friends (the fetus angel for instance), rely on others to care for him (even his brittle mother), and hope for the future. But when he crosses the threshold into adulthood, he starts to understand the lonely, spiritually wounded Cameron and the need to connect to someone real, something tangible.

Sometimes, terrible things happen quite naturally," *The Reflecting Skin* informs us, and Ridley's movie contrasts views of beautiful if overwhelming nature with images of human ugliness. So much of what occurs in *The Reflecting Skin* happens between the lines. We ask questions but don't get answers. With his hair falling out and gums bleeding, and history of military service in the Pacific, was Cameron exposed to the atomic bomb and suffering from radiation sickness? If so, the movie concerns the death of innocence on a much grander, even global scale.

The Reflecting Skin asks the audience to consider much, and be satisfied with only half-answers. Yet it's powerful for what it says of childhood and adulthood, for what it says about fantasy and reality. In the end, it's unforgettable.

Servants of Twilight * 1/2

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bruce Greenwood (Charlie Harrison); Belinda Bauer (Christine Scavello); Grace Zabriskie (Mother Grace Spivey); Richard Bradford (Henry Rankin); Jarrett Lennon (Joey Scavello); Carel Struycken (Kyle Barlow); Jack Kehoe (Dr. Denton Boothe); Dale Dye (Police Officer); James Harper (Frank Ross); Bruce Locke (George Wong); Kelli Maroney (Sherry Ordway); Al White (Pete Lockburn); Dante D'Andre (Catalan); Patrick Massett (Sandy Breckenstein); Julian McWhirter (Vera Lancaster); Russel Lunday (Detective Falconi); William Porter (Caretaker); Sage Allen (Edna).

CREW: Trimark Pictures Presents a Gibraltar Entertainment/Trimark Pictures Production. *Casting:* Michelle Guillermin. *Production Designer:* Deborah Raymond, Dorian Vernacchio. *Music:* Jim Manzie. *Film Editors:* Doug Ibold, Earl Ghaffari. *Director of Photography:* Antonio Soriano. *Executive Producers:* Mark Amin, Andras Lane, Wayne Crawford, Joel Leine. *Co-Producer:* William Sachs. *Based on the book* *Servants of Twilight* *by:* Dean R. Koontz. *Screenplay by:* Jeffrey Obrow, Stephen Carpenter. *Produced by:* Venetia Stevenson, Jeffrey Obrow. *Directed by:* Jeffrey Obrow. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Mother Grace (Zabriskie), the leader of the Church of the Twilight, believes she has located the anti-Christ in the form of a young suburban American boy, Joey Scavello (Lennon). After accosting the boy and his mother Christine (Bauer) at a parking garage, Mother Grace sends out an army of assassins to murder the boy. Seeking protection for her son, Christine hires detective Charlie Harrison (Greenwood). But even as he protects the Scavellos, Charlie begins to notice odd things about Joey, and his suspicions of the boy's true nature grow...

COMMENTARY: Based on Dean Koontz's 1988 best-seller, originally published under a pseudonym, this movie adaptation of *Servants of Twilight* by Jeffrey Obrow quickly proves incoherent, illogical, and, finally, infuriating.

The movie is incoherent because it is framed structurally like *D.O.A.* (1950), as a sort of film noir flashback from the perspective of doomed, world-weary detective Charlie Harrison (Greenwood). There's not a problem with this approach save that in the case of this film it seems scattershot and devised after the fact. The book-end, exposition-heavy narration plays like a post-production band-aid, not an organic way of telling this particular story. This is especially true since, at one point, the movie moves beyond the flashback and into the present, creating even more questions. Baffled audiences will be asking themselves, "Who is this guy Charlie is talking to?" (Answer: a doctor). And why is he talking to him about this case?

Servants of Twilight is illogical because it doesn't really examine the implications of its own narrative. This movie concerns a boy who is menaced by a religious leader and public figure, Mother Grace Spivey. Her views are pretty whacked too: she tells her followers to take up arms and shoot and kill the child. Given both her public persona and the extreme nature of her views, the movie should explain how she manages to stay free.

Oddly, the police in the film never even question her. This is

after—on her bidding— church members break into a house, decapitate a family dog, and shoot two detectives, both former cops. Don't you think Grace might get hauled down to the station for questioning here?

Then—doing the work the police should be doing—detective Charlie Harrison goes into the lion's den to question Mother Grace. Yet he doesn't ask her a single specific question about why she believes that Joey Scavello is the Anti-Christ. She says God told her this truth, but he doesn't ask in what context? Did she have a vision? Was a message spelled out to her? Charlie risks his life to visit Grace in her protected sanctuary, but then questions her enough just to presume she is a mad fundamentalist zealot.

As a detective, I would want to know the hows, wheres and whens. If Grace wishes to be believed and not written off as a Mansonite-cult leader, she would happily oblige. She would recite chapter and verse of her conversation with God.

There's also a third-act surprise in *Servants of Twilight* that fails the smell test. Charlie's best friend and mentor, a former cop and detective himself, Henry Rankin (Richard Bradford), turns out to be on Mother Grace's side. He tries to murder Joey himself.

Again, don't you think that Charlie might know something about his mentor's conversion to a pretty extreme, violent brand of Christian religion? Why? Well, people talk, for one thing. I'm sure Henry has friends and family, and certainly they would notice that he's changed. Word gets out. If your buddy joined Al Qaeda, you'd know. If your buddy joined David Koresh's church, you'd know. And the same is true of Grace's out-of-the-norm church. It doesn't make a lick of sense that a long-established cop, devoted to the law, would become a Servant of Twilight and then blindly—on one woman's vague word— commit the murder of an innocent.

All of this nitpicking is small potatoes, however, compared to the infuriating finale of *Servants of Twilight*. It turns out Joey actually is the Anti-Christ and has been manipulating everybody around him. So Mother Grace's dedicated follower, Kyle (Carel Struycken), who stood up to his spiritual guru and lived by the moral code that it is wrong to kill a child, any child? Well, he was just deluded, wasn't he? He should have listened to the crazy lady who was talking to God instead.

Basically, the movie's ending, that Joey is a malevolent devil-child, undercuts every single thing that comes before it. It says, essentially, it is okay to use tactics like breaking and entering, not to mention murder, because the larger cause was just. In the decade of the first World Trade Center bombing and the Olympic bombing by

anti-abortion zealot Eric Rudolph, this is a bad and irresponsible message for entertainment to send. Basically, *Servants of Twilight* would have you believe that Mother Grace was right all along, she did receive a vision from God, and she was right to use all of her powers to go after a child because he really is the Anti-Christ. And those two detectives protecting him, well they were just collateral damage. God will understand.

This movie just doesn't play fair with the audience. It wants so desperately to trick and surprise that it gives no thought to what the movie is actually about or what kind of message it transmits.

If you've got God on your side, I guess decapitating the family dog is all in the line of duty.

La Setta (a.k.a. The Devil's Daughter, Demons 4) * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kelly Curtis (Miriam Kreisl); Herbert Lom (Moebius Kelly); Maria Angela Giordano (Kathryn); Michel Adatte (Frank); Carlo Cassola (Dr. Pernath); Tomas Arana (Damon); Angelika Maria Boeck (Claire); Giovanni B. Lombardo (Martin Romero); Niels Gulløv (Mr. Henri); Richard Sammel (Truck Driver).

CREW: Silvio Berlusconi Productions, Penta Films and Dario Argento present a film by Michele Soavi. *Costume Designer:* Vera Cozzolini. *Music:* Pino Donaggio. *Production Designer:* Massimo Antonello Geleng. *Director of Photography:* Raffaele Mertes. *Film Editor:* Franco Fraticelli. *Executive Producer:* Andrea Tinnirello. *Story and screenplay:* Dario Argento, Giovanni Romoli, Michele Soavi. *Produced by:* Dario Argento, Mario Cecchi Gori, Mario Cecchi Gori. *Directed by:* Michele Soavi. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 112 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A lonely schoolteacher, Miriam Kreisl (Curtis), takes in a strange old man, Moebius Kelly (Lom), after accidentally striking him with her car on a road near Frankfurt. After Kelly dies in Miriam's country home, Miriam and her pet rabbits begin having strange experiences. Miriam discovers a well in her basement, one where the water is filled with strange blue algae. Then, Kelly's shroud seems to possess Miriam's teacher friend, Kathryn (Giordano). Finally, Miriam learns that she is being groomed to be the mother of the anti-Christ and that a Satanic sect is operating nearby.

COMMENTARY: *La Setta*, or "The Sect" begins with great promise. A wanderer in the desert who resembles Jesus Christ comes upon a group of friendly hippies ... and kills them. The time is 1970. The place is Southern California. This murdering man, Damon (Arana), is one of "The Faceless Ones," a secret conspiracy of Satanists, and he's ready for revolution. But an unseen superior in a limousine (Lom) tells him it is not yet time and that they may have to "wait" even for "years."

In this prologue, *La Setta* nicely ties the Manson crazoid cult movement of the 1970s to the SRA (Satanic Ritual Abuse) scandals of the 1980s, to the fear of illuminati and dark conspiracies of the 1990s. And all with a sinister purpose: a new world order, a one-hundred centuries duration in which man will worship the Devil.

But after the prologue, in the story proper, *La Setta* sacrifices its creepy beginnings for an odd and incoherent reprise of *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). In other words, it's a long, twisty road to a last-minute Satanic pregnancy and birth, with a lonely music teacher, Miriam, in the Rosemary role.

But before the movie reaches that end game, it obsesses on Miriam's pet rabbits, features a purposeless sexually-themed murder at a truck-stop, touches on a strange subplot about weird blue string poisoning the water supply at Miriam's house, and highlights at least two ridiculous scenes of people being attacked and suffocated (and then possessed) by Lom's death shroud, really just a white wash-cloth.

It's a long strange road, all right, and one with a familiar destination to boot, so this is yet another Italian horror that shuns narrative clarity and situational logic for a series of impressively rendered but loosely connected horrific setpieces. Although *La Setta* is sometimes billed as *Demons 4*, it seems to have nothing to do with that particular movie series and is far more staid in its approach to storytelling.

Yet, some of the images remain quite memorable. At one point, Lom's character puts a little bug up Miriam's nose as she sleeps, and Soave cuts to a bug's eye view inside her nostril. As the viewer travels this pink, fleshy tissue, the image transitions to a dream sequence of Miriam wandering in a landscape of red flowers and coming upon Jesus Christ, crucified on a tree. Powerfully symbolic, this nightmare scene ably suggests Miriam's forthcoming role in the birth of a monster, and the forsaking of the messiah.

Another sequence, with Miriam's friend peeling open a metal casket with a can-opener, also builds suspense well. The moment is intercut with a view of Miriam reaching for her dropped keys in a

pool that contains the corpse of her friend, Kathryn.

But a movie has to be more than the sum of its parts, and though *La Setta* is strong at setting up an atmosphere of doom, it is confounding and baffling in terms of characters, situations and overall story. Why include the rabbits and all the rabbit jokes? Why should Lom's character, Moebius, in possessing the living Kathryn, submit her body to such an oddly sexual form of death (at the hands of a randy trucker)?

What is all the blue grue, and how come it sometimes really grosses Miriam out and sometimes doesn't? On that last count, the movie features a scene of Miriam discovering all the fish dead in her aquarium, strangled by the blue algae. The very next scene finds Miriam in a bath-tub, filled with blue-hued water.

Would your first act, upon discovering your pet fish throttled to death by blue goop in the water, be to go get in a tub of the very same contaminated water?

The film's final sequence also relies on a *deus ex machina*. Miriam has given birth to the Anti-Christ. She takes the baby and flees, with Moebius in hot pursuit. Then, making a supreme self-sacrifice, Miriam throws herself and the baby into a raging fire. This is an important decision for the character, one who has felt alone all of her life. She must conclude, before the act, that she does "belong," to the human race, even to "goodness" itself and that therefore she will not deliver her brothers and sisters into a hundred centuries of darkness.

But then, the next morning, during the clean-up of the charred bodies, Miriam miraculously comes back to life. God has saved her. But no, she says the Satanic child saved her, that he was really her "son." Then, before the viewer can think too much about this, the movie ends on a blurry freeze frame of out-of-focus trees in the background. WTF?

Late in the picture, an evil doctor (one of "The Faceless Ones") informs the pregnant Miriam that "nine months" will pass like "nine seconds." In *La Setta* time, 112 minutes seems like 112 years.

***The Silence of the Lambs* * * * ***

"Jonathan Demme's movie *The Silence of the Lambs* is more than an artistic and commercial success. Based on mind games between a young woman F.B.I trainee and a psychiatrist who happens to be a most intelligent cannibal, it is the only film in recent memory that deserves to be compared to Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 classic, *Psycho*. It is a *Psycho* for our day, intensified for a period more psychologically aware and more inured to violence."—Caryn James, *The New York Times*, "Now Starring, Killers for the Chiller 90's," March 10, 1991, page 1

"Because of its horrifying subject matter, *The Silence of the Lambs* could be highly controversial. But the movie's graphic images of brutality never seem gratuitous or exploitative. To Demme's credit, he avoids directly portraying acts of violence against women. Instead, he shows glimpses of the gruesome results, clinically and without sensationalism. What is truly horrifying, what haunts the imagination long after the film is over, is psychological, not physical—the chilling way that Lector talks, the seductive evil of his penetrating gaze."—B.D. Johnson, *Maclean's*, "The Evil That Men Do," February 18, 1991, Volume 104, Issue 7, page 51

"Like almost all such screen-plays, *Lambs* begins veristically, trim and hard; then, as the action heats up, the incredible begins to seep in, to keep things heated. The weakest elements in the film are first, the linkage between the two killers; and second, the trainee's 'big situation' at the end. She goes forward single-handed—stupidly and unbelievably—into a terribly dangerous situation when she could easily have taken time to withdraw and call for help. The way the danger is resolved, in the dark, is past belief."—Stanley Kauffmann, *The New Republic*, "Stanley Kauffmann on Films," February 18, 1991, Volume 204, issue 7, pages 48–49

"The horror film that refused to be called a horror film. In many ways, this is a suspense thriller, shot in almost a documentary style, but everything about this film works so very well. The acting is fantastic, Howard Shore's music (in one of his earliest scores) set an amazing tone, and the perspective of a young woman who was not the 'final girl' from slasher films was something new and refreshing, and Jodie Foster did exceptional work. Anthony Hopkins gave us one of the great screen villains of all time, but we must remember, he's not the villain in this story (nor is he in any of the Thomas Harris novels about him, save for the prequel *Hannibal Rising*). He is the dark advisor, something more out of Faust than of typical horror fare. This is a

perfect film if ever there was one, as good if not better than *Psycho*. Night vision goggles will never be as terrifying as they were here. Ted Levine's Buffalo Bill is so natural that we don't see him as the villain, even though he is—we're too busy watching Hannibal Lecter."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"What more can be said about this, the film that literally kicked off the modern psychological thriller subgenre as it currently exists? Anthony Hopkins became a household name playing Hannibal Lecter, and rightfully so. Demme's directorial style hasn't aged quite as well as I imagined it would, but it's the performances that really anchor this one."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jodie Foster (Clarice Starling); Anthony Hopkins (Dr. Hannibal Lecter); Scott Glenn (Jack Crawford); Ted Levine (Buffalo Bill/Jame Gumm); Anthony Heald (Chilton); Brooke Smith (Catherine Martin); Diane Baker (Senator Martin); Charles Napier (Lt. Boyle); Tracey Walter (Lamar); Roger Corman (Hayden Burke); Ron Vawter (Paul Krendler); Frankie Faison (Barney); Chris Isaak (SWAT Commander); Kasi Lemmons (Ardelia Mapp); Daniel Van Barger (SWAT Commander).

CREW: An Orion Pictures Release, a Strong Heart/Demme Production. *Casting:* Howard Feuer. *Music:* Howard Shore. *Costume Designer:* Colleen Atwood. *Production Designer:* Kristi Zea. *Director of Photography:* Tak Fujimoto. *Film Editor:* Craig McKay. *Based on the novel by:* Thomas Harris. *Executive Producer:* Gary Goetzman. *Written by:* Ted Tally. *Produced by:* Edward Saxon, Kenneth Utt, Ron Bozman. *Directed by:* Jonathan Demme. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 118 minutes.

INCANTATION: "We wanted to exploit people's endless fascination with scary stories, and provide them with a tremendously powerful version of a scary story, but we didn't want to upset their lives."—Jonathan Demme discusses *The Silence of the Lambs* as a horror film.¹²

SYNOPSIS: F.B.I agent-in-training Clarice Sterling (Foster) is recruited by section head Jack Crawford (Glenn) to interview the incarcerated serial killer Hannibal "The Cannibal" Lecter (Hopkins) in hopes that the madman and psychiatrist will share some useful information about a current case, the hunt for another serial killer nicknamed "Buffalo

Bill" (Levine). Starling and Lecter quickly develop a rapport, but a gambit to get more information out of Lecter goes badly wrong when he escapes from captivity. Now, it is up to Clarice—remembering the words and clues of the psychiatrist, Dr. Lecter, to track down and hunt Buffalo Bill, a man undergoing a sexual metamorphosis. She's running out of time too, for the madman has abducted a U.S. senator's daughter.

COMMENTARY: *The Silence of the Lambs* is one of the best and indeed, the most influential horror films of the 1990s. Jonathan Demme's Oscar-winning film thrillingly updates the commonly-seen police (well, F.B.I....) police procedural structure with two fresh ingredients: the decade's most prominent screen boogeyman, the serial killer Hannibal Lecter, and the forensic attributes and character of dedicated police work.

Yet *The Silence of the Lambs* is more than that simple description implies too. In broad terms, the film concerns, thematically, Clarice Starling's search for her own identity. In this quest, she is torn between two paternal role-models, Anthony Hopkins' Lecter and Scott Glenn's Jack Crawford, both of them vying to substitute for the law enforcement father she lost in childhood.

Clarice's quest to discover herself is mirrored by the twisted, delusional quest of Buffalo Bill, the killer in the film. Bill must choose a path too, between remaining a male as he was born biologically or becoming a female, as he feels he really is, we presume, psychologically-speaking.

In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Clarice (Jodie Foster) is an ambitious, sincere young law enforcement official in training, uncertain, exactly, where she should fit in a male-dominated, macho world. During the course of the film, she is tasked with solving a crime and afforded these two mentors. One is Jack, her boss at Quantico. One is Hannibal Lecter, a former psychiatrist who is also a serial killer and cannibal. Both men, however, see a way to "use" Clarice for their own personal agendas.

Jack sends the beautiful Clarice to visit Hannibal because he wants to see how the incarcerated madman will respond to a young, beautiful woman. Hannibal quickly sees through this transparent attempt at distraction, but nonetheless "befriends" Clarice, if that's the right word. Later in the film, in a West Virginia funeral home, Jack willfully and purposefully excludes Clarice from the ongoing investigation, an autopsy in particular, in a brazen act of "old boy" camaraderie, orchestrated so he can get in "good" with the surly, uncooperative local police authorities. Once more, Clarice is a tool by

which Jack advances his agenda.

Uniquely, Hannibal Lecter, though clearly a "monster," seems far more open about his desires. He covets freedom and offers to help Clarice on the Buffalo Bill case in exchange for a better cell ... one with a view. Although Hannibal "digs" ruthlessly into Clarice's psyche, he also treats her more honestly than the other father, eschewing the games of Jack Crawford. This is exemplified through Lecter's good counsel to Clarice in her hunt of Buffalo Bill. He doesn't play games, he asks instead of Buffalo Bill, and by extension, of his relationship with Clarice. "What is its nature?"

In the course of the film, Clarice must determine both her nature and Bill's. Is she a child of slick Jack Crawford, or of monstrous, but somehow sincere (and as she suggests, polite/civilized) Hannibal Lecter? Again, Lecter actually seems the preferable "father" here since, at the very least, he defends Clarice from sexism, rather than seeking profit from it. Specifically, Lecter kills both Miggs (who has tossed his semen on Clarice) and Chilton, the smarmy warden. In other words, as scholar Linda Badley suggests, he "avenges women victims of sexism."¹³

Demme's film explicitly draws out this dynamic of two mentors/fathers, one child with a particular style of image, an extreme close-up as non sequitur. One such visual occurs when Hannibal touches Clarice's skin with a single finger, in passing. The other is a reflection of that touch, Jack vigorously shaking Clarice's hand (once more in close-up) upon her graduation.

One touch is overtly sexual in "its nature" (Hannibal's touch), the other touch is part of a secretive game. Indeed, people question in the drama whether Clarice and Jack are sleeping together, but it's never up front. The importance of the handshake is that it seems an indicator that Jack, again, isn't being entirely honest with Clarice about his agenda. He may be welcoming her into the agency, but he still wants to sleep with her. Hannibal dispenses with the artifice.



A contemplative moment for F.B.I. agent Clarice Starling (Academy Award winner Jodie Foster) in the landmark serial killer film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

Editor Jon B. Lewis's book *The New American Cinema* also viewed Clarice in terms of her quest to understand and develop her own identity, and positioned that quest in direct contrast to Lecter and Buffalo Bill. Specifically:

... a woman manages to achieve an identity that the film codes as "real," an identity centered in a coherent interior self. She achieves this "real" identity at least in part through her action of resisting and, ultimately, investigating a psycho male antagonist's ostentatious "performance" identity, an identity made up of formulaic poses and manipulated surfaces.¹⁴

Although I agree with the assertion that Clarice creates a "real identity" based on her own interior self and sense of centeredness, I would argue that Lecter—though clearly a monster and a cannibal—remains the more honest of the two prospective "fathers" or men in her life. The formulaic poses and manipulated surfaces more easily apply to Jack Crawford's overt sexism on the job, his undercover attraction to Clarice, and his use of her as an object to "arouse" the interest of Lecter.

Although undeniably colorful, Lecter is never anything but honest with Clarice, at least until he perceives that she has betrayed

him. Now, it is easy to look at Buffalo Bill as possessing an ostentatious "performance" identity, considering his naked dance in front of a video camera in the "skin" of a female victim, but not Lecter. Lecter doesn't trick Clarice, and this is why there is a mutual respect between these characters.

Another way Clarice asserts her new sense of self in the film is, again, by looking at "its nature," at her past and childhood. Lecter susses out a childhood story about her time in Montana with a cattle rancher, and her need to rescue a baby lamb from slaughter—the very need that has likely resulted in her desire to be a law enforcement official, to save the innocent.

But Hannibal also (again truthfully) recognizes that Clarice is embarrassed about where she came from, that she's just one generation removed from "white trash," as he puts it. Given this history, it is no accident that the case of Buffalo Bill takes Clarice back to "poor," red state America where she grew up. Thereby, in defeating Buffalo Bill, she can also defeat her feelings of shame and inadequacy about her inadequate upbringing. Taking out the evil Buffalo Bill and rescuing a Southern Senator's heavily-accented daughter is the very thing that purges Clarice of the negative associations of her youth. In a way, she is proving herself to the world by taking out one of her own, someone who came from the same place she did.

In contrast to Clarice, Buffalo Bill seems to believe that his sense of identity hinges on his skin, not his soul, his background, or his achievements. If he can "wear" the skin of a woman, he will be perceived as a woman. Simple as that. This is a very shallow definition of self, and one that makes Bill seem more than a little pitiful. His act of "becoming" is actually a sham. He thinks that if he wears sheep's clothing, he will no longer be a wolf. He is unaware that the transformation he hopes to make will not heal his internal ugliness. Some suggest that Bill is a self-hating gay who, by transforming, hopes to eradicate homosexuality. He will "become" a woman, and therefore his desire for sexual intercourse with men will be "deemed" natural by society at large.

One of the reasons that *The Silence of the Lambs* proves so thrilling and involving is that the hunt for Buffalo Bill is a complex puzzle, a confusing maze that Clarice must navigate. In keeping with this conceit of the maze, director Jonathan Demme stages a preponderance of tracking shots in the film, tracking shots that, in particular, suggest a journey through the labyrinth. Oftentimes, the camera is positioned behind Clarice and it follows her path, cornering and bobbing to keep track of her. The film's opening sequence sets up this dynamic. The scene occurs in the woods near Quantico, as the

camera tracks from behind Clarice jogging. She is summoned to Crawford's office, and the camera adopts the same pose: following her through the "bureaucratic" maze of the building interior ... and that's another baffling labyrinth Clarice navigates: the paternal hierarchy of the FBI.

The maze imagery recurs once more in the film's tense finale, as Clarice—finally in sight of her prey—descends into Buffalo Bill's basement of horrors. Again, the camera takes up a perspective behind her as she countenances twists and turns in her hunt for the killer, moving from room to room.

This style of composition not only suggests a maze, a puzzle, but performs the important work of keeping crucial positional information hidden from the audience at the same time as Clarice is denied it. We are looking over Clarice's shoulder, attempting to make out details; attempting to "see" the killer, just like her. This angle makes us sympathize with her task, and makes us experience her fear too.

Another shot in the film prepares us for this valedictory danger in Bill's basement. In a training simulation, Clarice bursts into a room to free a hostage but doesn't check her corners. Very quickly, she is (mock) executed by the perp. Cleverly, the finale repeats that scenario, and makes the viewer wonder if Clarice is going to make the same mistake twice. Then, cleverly, Demme adds another element: night-vision goggles and a terrain of total, impenetrable darkness. Now Clarice's survival depends not merely on checking on corners, but on her control of all her senses. Ultimately, she hears a sound and is able to draw a bead on Bill before he kills her.

Today, American pop culture has endured a decade of *CSI*, *Forensic Files*, *Court TV* and other dramas or documentaries in which forensic pathology provides the clues by which to catch serial killers and other criminals. Today, this approach doesn't seem like anything special or particularly interesting. It's old; it's *de rigueur*.

This was not the case in 1991, when *The Silence of the Lambs* initiated the cycle. Part of its appeal at the time was the careful, forensic approach to catching Buffalo Bill, the methodical accumulation of clues based on trace evidence, autopsy results, the presence of a death's head moth, and other seeming minutiae. Before their overuse, these touches made the film feel fresh and cutting edge. Or, as the authors of *Stories and Portraits of Self* noted, "this unknown territory" (forensic science) "fascinates the viewer as much as the female protagonist."¹⁵

For horror aficionados the bone of contention with *The Silence of the Lambs* is always its nature as a police procedural. Is it even a

horror movie? The answer, of course, is yes, especially if one also counts non-supernatural horrors such as *Psycho* and *Halloween* as horror movies.

In keeping with the genre, the film features a boogeyman, a figure of dread and great power that bloodily kills his victims. In fact, *The Silence of the Lambs* has two such monsters: Lecter and Buffalo Bill.

Lecter, in particular, represents the logical, next-stage development of the slasher bogeyman. By the end of the 1980s, Freddy Krueger, Pinhead, Chucky and others couldn't stop yakking. They weren't just mad dogs; they were charismatic personalities and individuals. Lecter is this idea evolved. He's not supernatural, but he still gets the one-liners ("I'm having an old friend for dinner"), and he still provokes fear.

Hopkins is exquisite in the role: urbane, droll and strong. Lecter's first appearance in the film suggests that strength in terms of visuals. It's a P.O.V. from Clarice's perspective. Lecter could not have been expecting her, yet he is standing still, in the center of his cage, eyes on her ... expecting her. It's a creepy moment.

Likewise, Buffalo Bill is plainly a slightly more evolved (and explained) version of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre's* Leatherface, a knuckledragging menace with a confused sexual identity who, in his effort to fit in, wears the skins of his victims. Like Leatherface, there is no reasoning with Buffalo Bill. He doesn't see his victims as human. "It puts the lotion in the basket," he tells the Senator's daughter, refusing to use her name; refusing to acknowledge her as a thinking, feeling human being.

Some critics have even suggested that *The Silence of the Lambs'* "horror" approach to storytelling mirrors Buffalo Bill's body suit. It's a patchwork of cast-off genre pieces, re-assembled in a new time, for a new purpose. Neil Badmington, author of *Posthumanism* writes:

Demme's film wears its horrors and its pleasure around the remains of other horror films and literature. It quotes from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, from Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill*, from William Wyler's *The Collector*, and it features a reincarnation of Bram Stoker's insane Renfield, the murderous idiot savant of *Dracula*. The film, indeed, has cannibalized its genre, consumed it bones and all and reproduced it in a slick, glossy representation of representations of violence, murder, mutilations, matricide and the perverse consequences of gender confusion.¹⁶

In the way the film re-parses its antecedents, *The Silence of the Lambs* is undeniably clever, yet its influence on the genre is just as important.

To state it bluntly, *The Silence of the Lambs* is as important a title in the horror catalog as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) or John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). It set off a long-lasting trend (the serial killer flicks of the 1990s), re-imagined the "insightful" final girl as a thoughtful, intelligent and mature professional, completed the transition of the Boogeyman begun with Freddy Krueger and the rubber reality films of the 1980s, and replaced supernatural methods of monster-hunting (crucifixes, séances and the like) with the auspices of science, particularly forensic pathology.

Stylistically, the movie is also deft. For instance, Demme has fun misdirecting the audience, particularly in a scene of dramatic cross-cutting involving Clarice's investigation of a lead and Jack Crawford's raid on what he believes is the home of Buffalo Bill in Belvedere, Ohio.

Like horror films of previous generations, *The Silence of the Lambs* also scares and sickens, relies on taboos (transgender transformations and cannibalism), and, most importantly of all, seems to reflect the age it was made, telling us something important about the culture that created it.

On that last front, just look for images of the Gulf War, military issue night-vision goggles, and the American flag in *The Silence of the Lambs*. These symbols of American strength appear several times throughout the film, mostly in association with Buffalo Bill and his home. At one point, a poster is seen that reads "America: Open Your Eyes."

What this surfeit of American patriotic symbolism seems to suggest is that while America is focused on "exterior" threats (like Saddam Hussein in Iraq), deeper threats are emerging domestically. The Cold War, Desert Storm and other "conflicts" have taken attention and money away from the poor, and from infrastructure itself, especially in the red state America depicted here, and the result is that a deep and roiling sickness has grown. It's hard to see: Clarice can hardly see it in the dark; she can only ... sense it.

If America doesn't "open its eyes" to these threats from within, there will be more Hannibal Lecters, more Buffalo Bills on the horizon, suggests *The Silence of the Lambs*. This is not an unimportant message in the age of individual American monsters like Jeffrey Dahmer, the Unabomber, Timothy McVeigh and the Columbine Killers.

Sleeping with the Enemy * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Julia Roberts (Laura Burney); Patrick Bergin (Martin Burney); Kevin Anderson (Bob Woodward); Elizabeth Lawrence (Chloe); Kyle Secor (Fleischman); Claudette Nevins (Dr. Rissner); Tony Abatemarco (Locke); Marita Geraghty (Julie); Harry Venton (Garber); Nancy Fish (Woman on Bus); Sandi Shackelford (Edna); Bonnie Cook (Mrs. Nepper).

CREW: 20th Century-Fox presents a Leonard Goldberg Production, a Joseph Ruben Film. *Music:* Jerry Goldsmith. *Casting:* Karen Rea. *Film Editor:* George Bowers. *Production Designer:* Doug Kraher. *Director of Photography:* John W. Lindley. *Executive Producer:* Jeffrey Chernov. *Based upon the novel by:* Nancy Price. *Written by:* Ronald Bass. *Produced by:* Leonard Goldberg. *Directed by:* Joseph Ruben. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A kept woman, Laura (Roberts), who lives every day in mortal fear of her obsessivecompulsive, abusive husband, Martin (Bergin), plots to escape from her life in a gilded cage on Cape Cod. She uses a sailboat trip and her well known fear of drowning to escape Martin's suffocating grip. With her husband believing her dead, Laura flees to a small town in the Midwest and gets a job at a local college library. Soon, she's fallen in love with a drama instructor, Ben (Anderson), unaware that Marin has begun to suspect that she is still alive...

COMMENTARY: Now here's a prime slice of 1990s thriller "cheese," a thoroughly average Hollywood product that nonetheless pressed itself deeply and permanently into the pop culture firmament. Just about everyone seems to remember Julia Roberts discovering the straightened towels in her bathroom during the climax of *Sleeping with the Enemy*.

And the lined-up cans in her cupboard too.

Personally, I know that to this day, when my wife and I argue, I approach her with the opener, "I'm sorry we quarreled," Patrick Bergin's non-apology apology to Julia Roberts' abused character.

Exhibit A in the case against 1990s horror movies could very well be *Sleeping with the Enemy*. What little artistry exists in this film rests entirely in the field of production design, courtesy of Doug

Kraner.

Martin's home is an example of glorious but cold modern architecture. It is all hard angles and big windows, so we can observe everything happening inside, but it's a place where we wouldn't want to live. It is devoid of warmth, and generally the space feels emotionally empty (think of the hotel in Kubrick's *The Shining*, only with Zen minimalist furnishings).

This is Laura's dungeon, and the architecture tells the audience everything we need to know about Martin's character: he's a stone cold bastard, stoic and austere ... shorn of human warmth. The Berlioz (also from Kubrick's *The Shining*) that doubles as Martin's preferred love theme also adds to the impression of a sociopathic maniac.

At the film's twenty-nine minute point, this Rapunzel escapes her tower prison, and heads to heartland America. Suddenly, the film becomes colored entirely in autumnal browns and glowing oranges. All the warmth we missed in the white-on-white first portion of the film becomes evident on-screen by the bushel full.

Laura rents a beautiful, perfectly restored historic home with a giant porch ... wonderfully furnished. How she can afford a magnificent home like this remains a well-kept mystery. However, it is only here in this welcoming "bosom," surrounded by Americana, nostalgia and the trappings of the healthy middle class that Laura's catharsis can begin.

Accordingly, the film presents a montage of Laura "nesting" in this new "warm" home: painting kitchen cabinets, setting out potted plants, and swinging by sunset on her porch swing. It is individual therapy by way of Martha Stewart, the Domestic Goddess of Home Depot.

Just paint some cabinets, arrange some flowers, and purchase something ... and you will be happy. Your inner child will be healed, and you will forget all about your abusive husband.

After the surprisingly effective production design, which tells us more about the world the characters inhabit than does the script, *Sleeping with the Enemy* relies primarily on a grandiose and overblown score by Jerry Goldsmith, one still occasionally used in movie trailers to this day. The rest of the film is a careful manipulation of Julia Roberts's *Pretty Woman* image and some cheap interloper-style thrills.

For all her talent, Julia Roberts is misused badly in this film, particularly in a totally out-of-place and campy *Pretty Woman* montage that occurs with theatre instructor Ben at the college's drama department. To the tune of "Brown Eyed Girl," Julia performs her "cute

little girl" routine with silly costumes and props. She adorns various and sundry "funny" hats and flashes that trademark, million dollar grin. She puts on clown pants and juggles too. She wears elephant ears. She adorns a top hat.

Kill me now.

Next, "Runaround Sue" plays on the soundtrack as Ben and Laura dance and share intimacy on the human level her former husband apparently could never understand. Although the opposition between a man who loves Berlioz and a man who loves 1950s rock is potentially interesting, these montages are problematic. When a movie can't conjure a way to connect with the audience via acting, camera angles or script, and is forced to plug in a nostalgic, popular song to do the trick, the filmmakers are relying on something other than their skill. This soundtrack pinch hitting occurs twice in *Sleeping with the Enemy*.

Anderson is granted a particularly lame introductory scene too. Julia spies him through her window as he's dancing in the backyard to the lyrics of *West Side Story*, using a water hose as a prop. There's definitely sub-text there, with a long hose and the show tune.

So basically, Laura has escaped a sexually domineering alpha male in Bergin's Martin, and there's even a scene where she endures rough intercourse with him (again, to the strains of Berlioz, I believe). She exchanges this for ... a *West-Side Story* singing guy who is good with water hose?

Don't ask; don't tell.

After a comedy of poorly constructed coincidences meant to create tension, in which Martin and Laura fail to spot each other at a nursing home, the final act of *Sleeping with the Enemy* arrives and it's the inevitable home invasion we've seen in a hundred 1990s films (*The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, *Blue Steel*, and *The Guardian* to name but a few). Martin shows up to re-arrange the towels and cans, there's some tussling, and then a final sting-in-the-tail/tale.



He's sorry they quarreled. Laura Burney (Julia Roberts) is confronted by her obsessive compulsive husband Martin (Patrick Bergin) in *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991).

In the end, it takes three shots to put down the mad-dog but virile husband, and Julia is left in the waiting arms of her new "safe" boyfriend. The ending is as predictable as everything else in this canned, homogenized thriller.

Yet ... the film survives and is well-remembered to this day by many. *Sleeping with the Enemy* probably airs on television at least once a week—at least on basic cable—and was even unofficially re-made as a JLo movie a few years back, *Enough* (2002).

Sleeping with the Enemy may endure because the terrific production design makes us feel a certain way which, at least subconsciously, audiences find comforting. It's a rejection of un-American coldness and an embracing of warm Americana. And, I don't know, perhaps the film is appealing to disenfranchised housewives who wish their husbands were more sensitive. Maybe they somehow groove on the idea of "escaping" everyday life, moving to an idyllic town and romancing an effeminate man who can communicate with them and meet all their needs with a minimum of fuss and show tunes.

What the movie is actually saying, however, is that Laura can't be alone; can't survive on her own. She's just traded one unacceptable man for an acceptable one; she's still defined herself as a "girlfriend" or wife. It's actually a very anti-feminist movie; not the pro-female

parable that it masquerades as.

The cinema of the 1990s—the cinema of *Sleeping with the Enemy*—provides critics with a most difficult proposition. Before the 1990s, critics could usually tell a bad film right off. Horrible actors, bad sound, and ineffective out-of-focus camera work were telltale signs you were in movie hell.

Yet by the 1990s, virtually every film to come out of the Hollywood machine was flawless from a technical standpoint, even sumptuous. Camera work is pristine. Music is evocative. The sound is impeccable. But the stories? That's the rub.

Even good critics might be taken in by *Sleeping with the Enemy*. They might be hypnotized by that production design; enraptured by that architecture. These "face" values hide the fact that the movie's script is inadequate.

For instance: Martin discovers Laura's wedding ring floating in his bathroom toilet months after she supposedly died and started her new life. So ... he hasn't used the bathroom in his house even once in all that time?

Now that's what I call mourning...

It used to take a few hundred thousand dollars and bad camera work to make a thoroughly pedestrian movie; with the advent of fare like *Sleeping with the Enemy*, Hollywood proved it could spend tens-of-millions to achieve the same result.

***Subspecies* * * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Anders Hove (Radu); Angus Scrimm (King Vladislav); Michael Watson (Stefan); Laura Tate (Michelle); Michelle McBride (Lillian); Irina Movila (Mara); Ivan J. Rado (Karl); Mara Gigore (Rosa); Adrivan Vilcu (Ian).

CREW: Full Moon Entertainment presents a Ted Nicolaou film. *Casting:* Robert MacDonald, Perry Bullington. *Art Director:* Lucia Nicolaou. *Special Make-up Effects by:* Greg Cannom. *Film Editor:* Bert Glatstein, William Young. *Subspecies* *puppets created by:* Dave Allen. *Music:* Richard Kosinski, Michael Portis, John Zereizke, Stuart Brotman. *Performed by:* The Aman Fok Ensemble Orchestra. *Costume*

Designer: Oana Tofani. *Director of Photography:* Vlad Paunescu. *Based on an original idea by:* Charles Band. *Written by:* Jackson Barr, David Pabian. *Produced by:* Ion Inoescu. *Directed by:* Ted Nicolaou. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 77 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Romania, the vampire Radu (Hoves) makes his bid for power by killing his father, King Vladislov (Scrimm), and attempting to gain possession of the ancient relic called the bloodstone. Meanwhile, three beautiful students, including lovely Michelle (Tate), arrive in Romania to study local folklore. The students become pawns, and then participants, in Radu's attempt to steal the throne from his human-friendly brother, Stefan (Michael Watson).

COMMENTARY: One might very well suspect that things aren't going well from the inaugural scene in the direct-to-video effort *Subspecies*. There, the great horror icon and imposing star of the *Phantasm* series, Angus Scrimm, appears in a curly white wig that makes him resemble a kindly old granny. It's hard to get over such an indignity, but Scrimm does the right thing: his character mercifully expires after one scene, and presumably, the check cleared.

Alas, the remainder of the film isn't much better. A pale, witless vampire named Radu (Anders Hove) wants possession of the bloodstone, a relic that looks like a bloody Italian ice pop. And for some bizarre reason, Radu is almost universally depicted throughout the film as drooling copious amounts of blood, no matter the circumstance, no matter what activity he is actually involved in.

The movie also repeats the same series of shots until they become funny: Radu closes in on a female victim, his monstrous shadow stretching menacingly across a wall, only to be interrupted. His menacing shadow then recedes away in defeat.

Drats! Foiled Again!

In fact, Radu is seen so frequently in full Nosferatu garb in *Subspecies* that after awhile you feel like you're watching an alien on *Deep Space Nine* and not a menacing would-be boogeyman. He has over-sized, Mickey Mouse hands, for one thing.

Contrarily, *Subspecies* boasts two notable strengths. The first is location. The film was shot entirely in Romania and it looks absolutely terrific. The characters wander through expansive green fields and approach huge castles looming on the horizon.

Similarly, the characters spend time inside gloomy tunnels and chambers that can't be anything but 100 percent authentic. This quality gives the film a tremendous lift, even if it contrasts mightily

with the fake-looking special effects and make-up.

Secondly, it looks as though Romanian actors have been cast in the smaller and extra roles, and this adds some sense of authenticity in the drama too. It's just too bad, again, that the makeup and stop-motion work seem so phony. For instance, the great animator Dave Allen presents these little tiny demons that come to Radu's aid. These beings, heavily promoted in relation to *Subspecies*, are underwhelming. They not only look fake, they have almost no bearing on the plot. They're an effect simply for the sake of an effect, and not an important element of the story.

Awash in familiar vampire movie clichés, featuring indistinguishable female characters, and no driving narrative to speak of, *Subspecies* is subpar. But take solace: the 1993 sequel, *Subspecies 2: Bloodstone* is an improvement. This is one horror movie franchise where patience (and tolerance) pays off.

***Sundown: The Vampire in Retreat* * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: David Carradine (Jozek Mardulak); Bruce Campbell (Robert Van Helsing); Morgan Brittany (Sarah Harrison); Jim Metzler (David Harrison); Deborah Foreman (Sandy White); M. Emmett Walsh (Mort Besby); Dana Ashbrook (Jack); Dabbs Greer (Otto Trotsberg); John Ireland (Ethan Jefferson); George Buck Flower (Bailey).

CREW: *CASTING:* Caro Jones. *PRODUCTION DESIGNER:* David Brian Miller. *FILM EDITOR:* Christopher Cibelli. *MUSIC:* Richard Stone. *DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:* Levie Isaacks. *EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS:* Jack Lorenz, Dan Ireland. *PRODUCED BY:* Jefferson Richard. *WRITTEN BY:* John Burgess, Anthony Hickox. *DIRECTED BY:* Anthony Hickox. *MPAA RATING:* R. *RUNNING TIME:* 103 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A typical middle-class family, the Harrisons, visit the desert town of Purgatory, unaware that it is populated entirely by vampires. Mr. Harrison has been called to toil on a synthetic blood substitute to feed the vampires, but it is this very advance in technology that threatens to tear the town asunder. A rebel and insurrectionist named Jefferson (Ireland) hopes to overthrow Town Elder, Mardulak (Carradine), promising to bring back the traditional, blood-sucking values of the vampire race. Meanwhile, vampire-hunter

Robert Van Hel -sing (Campbell) arrives in town, also gunning for Mardulak ... really Count Dracula.

COMMENTARY: Like 1990's *Grim Prairie Tales, Sundown: The Vampire in Retreat* (made in 1988, but released in 1991) is a dedicated genre-blender. But it's not just the Western and the horror movie that are combined. Nope, the movie is also a campy comedy. And frankly, that's the part of the film that gets it into some trouble.

In terms of the Western, director Anthony Hickox gets much right, from the grandiose spaghetti Western soundtrack to climactic gun fights (with vampire-killing bullets made of fortified wood), to the wide-open natural vistas of the land around Purgatory.

In capturing this world of vampires and the western landscape of the United States, the film shares visual qualities in common with Western Gothics like *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996) and *John Carpenter's Vampires* (1998). Unlike either of those films, however, *Sundown* (a great title, too) keeps shooting itself in the foot with its insistence on campy humor. It was the times of course, but the dopey humor renders the film utterly inconsequential today. It's quirky to be sure, but not in a good way.

The special effects leave something to be desired too. The stop-motion bats that stop to talk and plot evil are awful-looking. Worse, the final battle scene drags on forever, a big dull, nothing of a gunfight.

Still, there's a great scene at the end of *Sundown*. Dracula has just been revealed as David Carradine, and the actor stops to make an impassioned speech about vampire history, charting where creatures of the night have been (killing widows and children, living in sewers...) and where, with a little fortitude and vision, they can go: a civilization beyond "purgatory."

The late Carradine may actually be totally drunk in delivering his big speech (especially if we're to believe the on-set gossip), but he's also inspired in delivery. The film's ending, in which vampires are freed from the dangers of the cross and are "truly forgiven" by God, is also memorable, original and actually a little emotional.

If all of this intriguing material had been vetted in a Western-style akin with, say, Clint Eastwood's 1994 film *Unforgiven*, *Sundown* might have been unforgettable instead of irredeemable.

***Terminator 2: Judgment Day* * * * .**

"... on the whole, *Terminator 2* has more than enough story, action, thrills, and eye-popping special effects to satisfy even the most numbed moviegoers."—Chris Hicks, *Deseret News*, July 9, 1991

"... this is one of the most exhilarating, unhindered battle films of all time."—David Thomson, *Have You Seen?*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, page 864

"One of the greatest sequels in film history pushed James Cameron into the forefront of Hollywood's elite. Everything is bigger and badder than its predecessor. Yes, it's preachy at times, and Linda Hamilton's transformation from her character in the first film isn't given as much credit as she deserves (probably because her voiceovers delivered most of the preaching). The original film was a self-contained piece of science fiction fun, but its sequel is the 'blockbuster' kind of film that summers are made of. *Terminator 2* had heart, superb action, good performances, and a gentle side that was certainly surprising given the lean viciousness of the original. Robert Patrick deserves much of the credit for this film—his T1000 is so slickly machinelike compared to the obvious 'clunky humanity' of Schwarzenegger's character that it's probably difficult to realize that it's a performance, and a grandly delivered one at that."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"At times in cinema history the sequel to a great film surpasses the original. This is the case with *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, which includes not only the best and most innovative computer-generated special effects for the time, and the spectacle of futuristic killer robot terminators locked in a battle where humanity hangs in the balance, but also raises one of the frequent questions posed in science fiction, that of humanity's relationship to technology. The specter of human self-annihilation through nuclear destruction or advanced technology is not new in science fiction, but this film suggests that the very technology that threatens our destruction may provide the hope for our redemption. In this installment of *The Terminator* franchise the cyborg played by Schwarzenegger has the capacity to learn beyond its initial programming to kill. Through a relationship with a young John Connor the terminator learns something of what it means to be human, including the concepts of care (bordering on becoming a father figure), emotion (particularly grief), and ultimately, at the film's climax, self-

sacrifice. In observing the terminator's ability to grow, Sarah Connor (in a voice over) finds hope for humanity in that if a terminator can discover the value of a human life perhaps humanity can as well. In *T2* we find an interesting narrative thread, and others related to the human/robotic relationship, that are thankfully revived and explored in somewhat greater depth in *Terminator Salvation*."— John W. Morehead, *TheoFantastique*

"Much like with the *Alien* franchise, this is a sequel that, in my opinion, is often unfairly prized over the original. Although it is a special effects extravaganza, it lacks the original's power and taut air of mystery and suspense. It's a two-and-a-half-hour music video, which when watched today, practically screams 'early '90s.' And don't get me started on Linda Hamilton's ridiculous metamorphosis...."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Arnold Schwarzenegger (Terminator); Linda Hamilton (Sarah Connor); Robert Patrick

(T-1000); Joe Morton (Miles Dyson); Earl Boen (Dr. Silverman); Danny Coochsey (Tim); Edward Furlong (John Connor); S. Epatha Mererson (Tarrisa Dyson); Jenette Goldstein (Janelle Voight); Xander Berkeley (Todd Voight); Michael Edwards (Old John Connor); Peter Schrum (Lloyd); Robert Winley (Cigar Biker); Don Stanton (Lewis the Guard); Dan Stanton (Lewis the T-1000); Dean Norris (SWAT Leader).

CREW: Mario Kassar Presents a Pacific Western Production in Association with Lightstorm Entertainment, a James Cameron Film. *Casting:* Mali Finn. *Costume Designer:* Marlene Stewart. *Music:* Brad Fiedel. *Special Effects:* Dennis Muren, ILM. *Special Make-up and Terminator Effects Produced by:* Stan Winston. *Film Editors:* Conrad Buff, Mark Goldblatt, Richard A. Harris. *Production Designer:* Joseph Nemec III. *Director of Photography:* Adam Greenberg. *Co-Producer:* B.J. Rack, Stephanie Austin. *Executive Producers:* Gale Anne Hurd, Mario Kassar. *Written by:* James Cameron, William Wisher. *Produced and directed by:* James Cameron. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 152 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two Terminators are sent from the post-apocalyptic year 2029 to modern-day 1997. One, the shape-shifting "liquid metal" T-1000 (Patrick) is assigned to kill adolescent John Connor (Furlong). The other, a T-800 (Schwarzenegger) has been re-programmed by the future Resistance movement to protect him. Together, the T-800 and

John bust Sarah Connor (Hamilton) out of a sanitarium and prepare a defense against a machine that can't be killed. But Sarah has another plan to prevent Judgment Day—the day of nuclear destruction. She wants to kill the man who will create Skynet, family man Miles Dyson (Morton).

COMMENTARY: While certainly not the lean, ruthless horror machine that its 1984 predecessor was, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* is still a damn fine sequel, one that gives the 1990s horror genre one of its most amazing and influential villains: Robert Patrick as the T-1000, a shape-shifting, CGI-morphing leviathan.

Although overly-long and occasionally heavy-handed ("it's in your nature to destroy yourself," tsk tsks Arnold at one point), *Terminator 2* is a self-reflexive thriller that dances a ballet on the audience's knowledge of the first film. For instance, as in the first film, this sequel opens with two men appearing from the future. One is thin and lean and very humanlooking. The other is Arnold Schwarzenegger. Because of the earlier film, viewers are conditioned to expect Schwarzenegger as villain again, and look for the Michael Biehn-ish Robert Patrick to be a hero. Of course, the opposite is true.

Secondly, *Terminator 2* takes the unlikely but clever step of turning Linda Hamilton's character, Sarah Connor, into a Terminator herself. I'm not referring to her amped-up physique, either, but rather her philosophy. Here, Sarah sets out to murder a man named Miles Dyson (Joe Morton) before he can complete Skynet, the system that ultimately destroys mankind and births the terminators. In essence then, Sarah is adopting the approach of the machines she hates so much; killing a person BEFORE that person actually commits a crime. Just as Skynet sent back a Terminator in 1984 to murder Sarah before she gave birth to John, the leader of the future era, so does Sarah endeavor to kill Dyson before he gives birth, in a very real sense, to Skynet. Since America has been all about pre-emptive strikes since the attacks of 9/11, *Terminator 2's* meditation on the subject remains fresh.



The ultimate symbol of science run amok. Terminators stalk the future in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991).



Preserving mankind at the expense of self. The Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) sacrifices himself in the finale of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*.

This sequel is also fascinating for the way it incorporates the social critique that "these films" (meaning the films of Schwarzenegger and Cameron, I suppose) are "too violent." In *Terminator 2*, young John makes Schwarzenegger's emotionless machine promise not to kill any more humans, and the terminator spends the remainder of the film shooting up cops' knee caps. It's funny, it's on point with what was happening in the culture, and it's so very nineties: inventive, unconventional and politically-correct at the same time.

The Terminator story has always been one of "science run amok," the latest word in Frankenstein stories. Here, the additional twist on that oft-told tale is that an Evil Business is behind the Frankenstein monster. Cyberdyne Systems knows full well that the Terminator

"parts" it illicitly acquired are from the future, and yet told no one, even though Sarah Connor is incarcerated over her wild ravings on the subject. The company is thus involved in the 1990s convention of conspiracy.

But it's even worse than that too: Cyberdyne Systems is totally irresponsible for building a new device made with science it clearly does not understand. But it's the bottom line that's important, the profit margin.

So many horror films of the 1990s concern the American family and modern changes in the American family, and *Terminator 2* is no different. Sarah Connor comes to the conclusion that instead of providing her boy, John, a flesh-and-blood, human father figure, the Terminator played by Arnold is the sanest answer in an insane world. The Terminator won't grow old, won't leave, and will never hurt John. He will always be there for the boy, she realizes, and in vetting this idea, the movie says something important about men and machines. When more and more American families were drifting towards divorce in the 1990s or outsourcing child care to nannies and day-cares, it's not odd that a woman should wish for the "ultimate nanny"—an unstoppable robot—to protect her son.

In terms of technology and influence, *Terminator 2* may be, without exaggeration, one of the most important films of the 1990s. The "morphing" or shape-shifting effects used to dramatize Patrick's Terminator would soon become *de rigueur* in science fiction and horror and would be featured in everything from *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991) to *Sleepwalkers* (1992). The morphing effects here are indeed impressive, but it is Robert Patrick who really sells them.

He carries his strength not just in his narrow, athletic form (a far cry from the bulging, overmuscled Schwarzenegger) but in his lasersharp, predatory eyes; which showcase enormous focus. If Robert Patrick were not completely believable in the role of a "liquid" terminator, this movie wouldn't work, plain and simple. But he's up to the task at hand, and makes for a scary, relentless, virtually invincible villain.

The action sequences in Cameron's sequel are also exceptional. The film's first major setpiece, involving a truck, a motor-bike and a motorcycle in motion, is a high-point, featuring stunning stunts and cutting. The finale, in a factory and leadworks, also proves highly dynamic, with the T-1000's death scene seeming like an odd homage to Carpenter's *The Thing*.

Some viewers may suggest *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* is an

action film or a science fiction, but not a horror film. They may have a point, but the film focuses on the fear of a nuclear apocalypse, and a shape-shifting villain who could very well help bring it about.

These aspects make the film scary and it's difficult not to see Sarah Connor's split-second escape from the mental institute as remarkably fear provoking, with the tireless T-1000 in close, hot pursuit.

In the decade of "it depends on what the definition of 'is' is" horror movies, *Terminator 2* fits the bill. It's a horror, and a good one at that.

***Two Evil Eyes* * * .**

Cast and Crew

CAST: "The Facts in the Case of Mr. Valdemar": Adrienne Barbeau (Jessica Valdemar); Ramy Zada (Dr. Robert Hoffman); Bingo O'Malley (Ernest Valdemar); Jeff Howell (Policeman); E.G. Marshall (Steven Pike). "The Black Cat": Harvey Keitel (Roderick Usher); Madelaine Potter (Annabel); John Amos (Detective Legrand); Sally Kirkland (Eleanora); Kim Hunter (Mrs. Pym); Holter Graham (Christian); Martin Balsam (Mr. Pym); Chuck Aber (Mr. Pratt); Jonathan Adams (Hammer); Tom Atkins (Detective Grogan).

CREW: Achille Manzotti presents a film by Dario Argento and George Romero, an ADC Gruppo Bema Production. *Executive Producers:* Dario and Claudio Argento. *Film Editor:* Pasquale Buba. *Production Designer:* Cletus Anderson. *Casting:* Elissa Myers, Paul Fonquet. *Music:* Pino Donaggio. *Written by:* George A. Romero. *Based on the works of:* Edgar Allan Poe. *Director of Photography:* Peter Reniers. *Directed by:* George Romero and Dario Argento. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 120 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In "The Facts in the Case of Mr. Valdemar," a married woman, Jessica Valdemar (Barbeau), and her illicit lover (Zada) hypnotize her rich husband, Ernest (O'Malley), on the verge of death, to liquidate her assets. But even dead, Valdemar proves a tough adversary. In "The Black Cat," a troubled police photographer and artist, Usher (Keitel), is stalked by a black cat after murdering his wife, a violin instructor.

COMMENTARY: The good news about *Two Evil Eyes* is that it offers two Edgar Allan Poe stories for the price of one and two great horror directors too: George Romero and Dario Argento. The bad news is that the movie is unexceptional, even forgettable, feeling more like two half-hour TV horror anthologies strung together and stretched out than an authentic feature film.

George Romero starts the proceedings off with "The Facts in the Case of Mr. Valdemar" and to put it bluntly, there are episodes of *Rod Serling's Night Gallery* shot with more sense of style and pace. Romero occasionally stages some nice shots, like a camera "creep" over the edge of a staircase ledge at a tense moment, but something about this installment feels like it is on autopilot. Disappointingly, especially considering Romero's history and aesthetic, the narrative doesn't seem to offer deeper meaning or subtext, either. What you see is what you get: the predictable tale of a venal wife who wants her husband's inheritance, her illicit plan to get it, and an unusual brand of revenge.

Dario Argento fares better with his subversive and lurid adaptation of "The Black Cat," which centers on Harvey Keitel's creepy police photographer, Usher. First Usher kills his girlfriend's cat, and then he kills his girlfriend. In a gruesome sequence, Argento cuts to the wife (hacked by a cleaver) in a bloody bathtub.

Like the earlier story, there's a sense of cosmic scales balanced as a black cat comes back to haunt Usher, who grows ever more desperate as the noose metaphorically tightens around his neck. The final sequences, involving a police chase and Usher's attempted escape from his house, are examples of virtuoso filmmaking: mad, bloody and inventive.

Watching *Two Evil Eyes*, you can't escape the feeling that this is horror in a minor key. The production values are unimpressive, the stories tend towards the dull and the over-long and, ultimately, there's no meaningful point to any of it.

It's not that *Two Evil Eyes* is a bad movie, it's just a thoroughly forgettable one.

The Unborn * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Brooke Adams (Virginia Marshall); Jeff Hayenga (Brad

Marshall); K Callan (Martha Wellington); Jane Cameron (Beth Sanders); James Karen (Dr. Richard Meyerling); Lisa Kudrow (Louise Krelm); Kathy Griffin (Connie Chicago).

CREW: Califilm Presents a film by Rodman Flender. *Production Designer:* Gary Randall. *Film Editor:* Patrick Rand. *Director of Photography:* Wally Pfister. *Music:* Gary Numan, Michael R. Smith. *Executive Producer:* Michael Elliott. *Written by:* Henry Dominic. *Produced and directed by:* Rodman Flender. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Virginia (Adams) and Brad (Hayenga) Marshall have grappled with infertility for five years. A visit to Dr. Meyerling (Karen), a miracle doctor, however, changes everything and gets Victoria pregnant in no time. During the pregnancy, however, Virginia becomes convinced that the child is not hers and that, furthermore, the child is not even human. She believes Meyerling has implanted her with a new breed of genetically engineered being ... one enormously strong, capable of defending itself ... and evil.

COMMENTARY: One of the major hot-button issues of the 1990s was reproductive rights. Was a woman's right to choose enshrined in the Constitution and re-affirmed in the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision? Or was there a "right to life" for unborn children who were to be aborted? In many senses, this not-often-civil debate about abortion dominated the culture war of the nineties.

This happened for several reasons. First of all, the year 1993 was the twenty-year anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* decision. Furthermore, some women's organizations deemed the decision in real danger when President Bush nominated Clarence Thomas for the Supreme Court in 1991. Although he stated he had not formulated his opinion on *Roe v. Wade*, many felt this was an evasion. And with the retirements of justices William Brennan and Thurgood Marshall, it was conceivable that "the right to choose" could be overturned.

At the same time, some states, like Pennsylvania, in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, were lodging challenges to the nearly two-decade-old decision. In Congress, pro-lifers including Charles T. Canady began a legislative fight to chip away at the edges of *Roe v. Wade*, hoping to ban, for instance, a procedure labeled "partial birth abortion."

In the late 1990s, right-wing extremist Eric Rudolph sowed terror at the 1996 Olympics, in part, over his objections to the legality of abortion.

Also coming to the forefront of reproductive rights issues were controversial infertility treatments including in-vitro fertilization, egg/

sperm donation, artificial insemination, and gestational surrogacy. A famous case in 1988, involving surrogate mother Mary Beth Whitehead, captured the nation's attention and attempted to settle issues of parental rights in an age of "wombs for rent."

Given this extreme visibility in the 1990s of such reproductive questions, it's no surprise that some horror movies sought to incorporate the issue of reproductive rights and abortion into their storylines. Case in point: *The Unborn*, a science run amok-styled film that explicitly references the Human Genome Project.

In particular, the film involves a geneticist and eugenicist, Dr. Meyerling (James Karen), who treats infertile women by implanting them with genetically-engineered sperm. His goal is to create the next evolution of the human race with "stronger," "smarter" and "better" babies. Unfortunately, in the vein of Larry Cohen's *It's Alive* (1972), the next generation of babies is also extremely murderous.

What this comes down to, then, is a new version of *Rosemary's Baby*, but with science itself functioning as "the devil." As in the case of the Polanski film, the husband in *The Unborn* is up to his eyeballs in the conspiracy. And, again like *Rosemary's Baby*, the film centers around a woman's possibly not-so-irrational fears surrounding her unusual pregnancy.

While never in the class of the Polanski film, *The Unborn* is commendable in the way that it creates sympathy for its lead character, children's book author Virginia Marshall. She's endured two miscarriages and is willing to undertake an in-vitro pregnancy under the guidance of Meyerling, who tells her that "today, almost anything is possible." The movie then depicts a medical procedure, replete with a very long needle, ominous music, and a surfeit of low-angles. It looks ... frightening.

During the pregnancy, Virginia begins to feel that she is less important than the baby she carries. It's an accurate perception of her situation and also, in a sense, the extreme-right-wing view, which does not always wish to take the "health of the mother" into consideration. "What am I? A goddamn incubator?" Virginia complains at one point.

After slipping into a "paranoid depression" and realizing what Meyerling has done to her (put a monster in her belly, essentially), Virginia then attempts to get an abortion. She quickly learns, however, it's against the law in the third semester. When a back-alley doctor offers to get rid of the gestating beastie for five hundred dollars, she takes him up on it, and again the movie seems to be a treatise about a mother's difficult position if she should come to have

qualms about her pregnancy.

Ultimately, however, the baby survives the abortion. Deserted in a dumpster—a potent image—it eventually returns home to Mommy. This is the ultimate nightmare and guilt-trip for a woman who has made such a difficult choice and just wants the whole thing to be over.

By film's end, Virginia and her telepathic, monstrous baby have bonded, in golden sunlight, no less, the mother-instinct seemingly having won out over the fear of giving birth to a monster. That's just how it happened in *Baby Blood* (1990) too.

The science gone amok angle comes into play in *The Unborn* most prominently during the third act, as Meyerling tells Virginia that "we don't need mothers anymore," and shows her artificial wombs with babies inside. A room full of them, to be exact. The image of medical science morphed into inhuman breeding farm recalls, at least a little, the donor organ facility of *Coma* (1978), another science-run-amok entry.

Blessed with a good central performance from Brooke Adams, *The Unborn* also features a modicum of suspense regarding the outcome of the pregnancy. There's also a surprisingly realistic and believable sex scene early on, performed in a rocking chair. It's very erotic and looks genuinely like something a loving married couple might do. *The Unborn* even has a sense of humor, especially in displaying one of the ubiquitous (in the nineties) "baby on board" car signs.

The Unborn's biggest drawback undoubtedly involves special effects. The monstrous baby doesn't look realistic or mobile, and this takes away a degree of reality from what is otherwise a fairly involving film on a subject of great relevance to the decade.

Future star watchers may also take note that Lisa Kudrow and Kathy Griffin appear in *The Unborn* in supporting roles. Griffin plays a lesbian who runs "Life Works," a kind of all-female variation on Lamaze.

The Vanishing (a.k.a. Spoorloos) * * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bernard-Pierre Donnadiou (Raymond Lemorne); Gene

Bervoets (Rex Hofman); Johanna Ter Steege (Saskia Watger); Gwen Eckhaus (Lieneke); Bernadette Le Sache (Simone); Tania Latarjet (Denise); Lucille Glenn (Gabrielle); Roger Souza (Manager); Pierre Farget (Laurent); Didier Rousset (TV Journalist).

CREW: Janus Films/World Distribution, MGS

Films Presents a film by George Sluizer. *Based on the novel The Golden Egg by Tim Krabbe. Written by:* Tim Krabbe. *Adapted by:* George Sluizer. *Director of Photography:* Toni Kuhn. *Art Director:* Santiago Isidro Pin. *Film Editors:* George Sluizer, Lin Friedman. *Music:* Henry Vrieten. *Produced by:* Anne Lorden, George Sluizer. *Directed by:* George Sluizer. *MPAA Rating:* NA. *Running time:* 107 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young couple, Saskia (Ter Steege) and Rex (Bervoets), vacation by car in France. After a fight, they reconcile and stop at a gas station. Then, without explanation, Saskia vanishes. Rex searches for her in vain for years, until an odd stranger, Lemorne (Donnaideu), steps forward with first-hand knowledge of her fate. He promises Rex that, if he wants, he will be able to experience exactly what Saskia experienced after she vanished.

COMMENTARY: Released theatrically in America in 1991, George Sluizer's *The Vanishing* (produced in 1988) is a haunting tale of personal obsession. A boyfriend loses the love of his life, Saskia, and over long years, grows desperate to learn what became of her. This obsession consumes everything else, until it becomes more critical to him, even, than his own continued survival.

Another prominent character in the Dutch drama is the unusual perpetrator of the woman's abduction, the self-professed "sociopath," Lemorne. This villainous character is unlike many such villains, such serial killers, in Hollywood films, simultaneously a perfectionist and, paradoxically, a bit hapless. At first, he doesn't seem remotely capable of wreaking such horror. At first he barely seems competent. Only as the audience gets to know the man, over time, does it detect how truly evil, how awful he really is, how he is a snake in the grass, hiding among "normal" human beings.

Again, this is a decidedly different approach from the almost super heroic, all-knowing, celebrity serial killers created by Hollywood, one likely more in tune with reality.

The Vanishing is based on the 1984 Tim Krabbe novel, *The Golden Egg*, and the importance of that strange and poetic title is evident in this Dutch film. Early in the proceedings, the not-yet-missing woman, Saskia (Johannah Ter Steege), explains to her boyfriend, Rex (Gene Bervoets), that she has recently experienced "another nightmare."

In that nightmare, Saskia dreamed that she was trapped in a golden egg flying through space for all eternity. And worse, she envisioned Rex in a golden egg of his own, but separated from her. The import of this imagery, and what the "golden egg" actually represents, is plain by the film's denouement. It's a metaphor for the separate coffins that their bodies are "incubated" in for eternity. It is a foreshadowing of the couple's grim and separated fate ... buried alive.

Liberated entirely from American studio commercial concerns, *The Vanishing* treads deeply into such symbolism, and brilliantly deploys film grammar to visually buttress the narrative's main points. The opening shot, for instance, is of great import. It's a lengthy, lingering view of a stick bug clinging to a tree. The bug is camouflaged, and therefore of the same brown color as the tree branch to which it connects itself. On first, cursory glance, it could be mistaken as an outcropping of the tree itself.

What this image represents is that the stick bug is like something else (the tree), and can pass as something else (again, the tree), but, significantly, it is not something else. It is unique. While watching *The Vanishing*, the viewer comes to realize that this image pertains to the most important quality of Saskia's heartless abductor, Lemorne (Bernard-Pierre Donnadiou). He is a sociopath—a man without feelings of empathy for other humans beings—yet he functions in French society both as a teacher and a family man. He seems to be one thing (a man), but is a different breed: a serial killer.

Indeed, it is that last descriptor, "family man," that lures Saskia into trusting Lemorne on the eve of her kidnapping. In his car, she sees a photograph on the dashboard, one showing him with his normal-appearing family. So she "sees" Lemorne, but does not sense or understand what he truly is. His camouflage has done the trick. He lives and hides among men, not revealing his nature as a monster.

Another finely-crafted composition early in the Dutch film also highlights a sense of ominous foreboding. Rex and Saskia's car has run out of gas in a long, dark tunnel. Rex leaves Saskia in the pitch-black tunnel alone and walks back down the road for more gas. When he returns from this sojourn, she is not at the car, but at the far lip of the tunnel instead.

In other words, Saskia is perched in the white (day) light at the end of the tunnel, a figure halfdiscerned, overcome visually by white illumination. We understand visually then, that the movie is once more foreshadowing her approaching death. She is literally in the light at the end of the tunnel, a common descriptor for "death" in many circles.

And sure enough, at film's climax, this evocative framing recurs. As his drive compels him to follow Saskia's tragic road, Rex travels the same terrifying miles, and upon his final disposition detects Saskia in the light at the end of the tunnel again. This time, he is joining her in death.

The Vanishing also charts the similarities and differences between Rex and Lemorne's personalities. Both men are obsessive to the point of dysfunction, and both are determined to battle—to the death—the hand that they presume Destiny has dealt them. Lemorne has learned from childhood that to feel special, he must push limits. This means he is willing to make dangerous leaps of faith, literally, and test his very nature. If he is capable of heroism (and "capable of rash gestures"), he wonders, is he also capable of great evil? His abduction and handling of Saskia is his answer to that question. We see him rehearse his planned abduction repeatedly, even testing his own pulse rate to see if it spikes during the personal violence and tense confrontation of the kidnapping.

Similarly, Rex is overtly obsessed with Saskia and her fate. In part, this may be because in the moments before they separated, he promised he would never abandon her. That seems to be the very thing Rex can't let go of, his vow never to leave Saskia behind. If he slips into a new life with his girlfriend, Lienneke (Gwen Eckhaus), he is not a man of his word, and he understands that fact. It's not so much that he loves Saskia any more, it's that he must know what became of her; he must stay true to that vow.

Like Lemorne, Rex seems to rehearse his own personal (imagined) moment of truth, in this case the decision whether to "not know" and perhaps let Saskia live, or to "know" and, in the process, let Saskia die. Rex's need to know the truth ultimately drives him to act heroically (again, rashly, per the vocabulary of the movie), and he sets himself up to learn his beloved's fate. But the act is rash: it is not her life at stake this time, it is his.

It's no secret that *The Vanishing* ends with one of the most harrowing, panic-inducing scenes ever put to celluloid, an absolute end to "uncertainty" for Rex, no doubt, but also a reflection of the golden egg nightmare introduced by Saskia.

In a truly horrifying moment, Rex—with his last breath on this Earth—defiantly shouts out his own name for the Heavens to hear; it is a desperate, last attempt to assert his human identity before going under, to the Hades constructed for him by the unfeeling Lemorne. He was real, his shout seems to verify. He existed.

Featuring very little by way of traditional music, *The Vanishing* is

icy, precise, gripping and surprising. One facet of the film that remains so fascinating is the fact that Sluizer doesn't attempt to cloak the identity of Saskia's abductor from the audience. On the contrary, he exposes Lemorne early on—and fully—so that the audience can balance hero against villain, sanity against insanity, empathy against emptiness. This also contributes to the sense of Lemorne as a real person, and not a loquacious, larger-than-life serial killer.

The Vanishing also concerns the way people make assumptions about other people, and whether emotions and pre-conceived notions color those assumptions, for better or worse. Shorn of emotions, Lemorne pursues his ruthless game. Confused by emotions, Rex plunges headlong into his grim destiny, all while believing he is going against the grain, playing the opposite of what fate has dealt him.

The performances in *The Vanishing* are powerful, right along with the subject matter. Johanna Ter Steege projects great energy and joy as Saskia, and when the audience loses her, it's shocking and terrible. We sympathize with Rex. That Lemorne takes that joy and energy and bottles it up in a constricting egg of sorts (perhaps, in effect, making it golden) is a great crime. This ugly act of snuffing out beauty makes Lemorne one of the 1990s' most dangerous and memorable serial killers and it makes *The Vanishing* indelible.

Warlock * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Julian Sands (Warlock); Lori Singer (Kassandra); Richard E. Grant (Giles Redferne); Mary Woronov (Channeler); Richard Kuss (Mennonite); Allan Miller (Detective); Kevin O'Brien (Chas); Anna Levine (Pastor's Wife); David Carpenter (Pastor); Kay E. Kuter (Proctor); Ian Abercrombie (Magistrate); Art Smith (Scribe).

CREW: New World Pictures presents an Arnold Kopelson production of a Steve Miner film. *Casting:* Melissa Skoff. *Music:* Jerry Goldsmith. *Cos tume Design:* Louise Frogley. *Film Editor:* David Finfer. *Visual Make-up and Effects:* Carl Fullerton, Neal Marz. *Production Designer:* Roy Forge Smith. *Director of Photography:* David Egby. *Executive Producer:* Arnold Kopelson. *Written by:* David Twohy. *Produced and directed by:* Steve Miner. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A Satanic warlock (Sands) and his arch-nemesis Redferne (Grant) are hurled forward in time by the "Devil's Wind" from 1691 to the year 1988. There, the Warlock contacts his spiritual father, the demon Zaimel, with the help of a reluctant medium, and is instructed to locate and bring forth three pieces of Satan's Bible, *The Grand Grimoire*: a book that can thwart creation itself. Meanwhile, Grant, with the help of a young diabetic, Cassandra (Singer), pursues the warlock. Unfortunately, the evil-doer has cursed Cassandra with an aging spell and she is aging two decades per day.

COMMENTARY: *Warlock* is a supernatural *The Terminator* (1984) in reverse. Here, a demon—"the rudest that ever troubled daylight"—and his human hunter arrive in our straight-laced present not from an apocalyptic, post-nuclear future, but from the superstitious, mystical past and duke it over the destiny of the planet.

Meanwhile, again like *The Terminator*, there are plenty of fish-out-of-water jokes on hand, as both the charismatic Warlock (Julian Sands) and his opponent Redferne (Grant) grapple with 20th century life and technology, alternately amused and irritating by aspects of our daily life like credit cards, automobiles and even table salt.

In the spirit of Cameron's film, Miner's *Warlock* also boasts a strong personal hook. Lori Singer plays Cassandra, a callow young woman who, after saying aloud "don't ever let me get old," is cursed by the Warlock with her worst nightmare. She's forced to endure the ravages of old age, going from forty to sixty to eighty in the span of days. The film follows Cassandra through the stages of her life, though today her old age make-up is not particularly convincing. Still, her dilemma is a powerful one, especially in the beauty-obsessed nineties, and it's rather amusing to saddle a great witch-hunter like Redferne with, by story's end, a geriatric companion.

I appreciate how this element of the story plays with genre conventions. The Warlock's actions essentially preclude Cassandra from becoming what we expect her to be from the start: an appropriate love interest for Redferne.

Warlock also extracts much wicked fun out of the titular character, an absolutely malevolent character played with elegant style by Julian Sands. In one memorable scene, the Warlock determines that he requires the fat of an unbaptized child to develop the power of flight ... and so skins the kid. In another scene, the Warlock cuts out a medium's eyeballs to harness for his own purposes too. He is vicious, threatening to turn one man's progeny into "slugs of cold flesh," and it's easy to see why Sands' performance is both star-making and franchise-creating.

David Twohy, the originator of this material, is a talent to be reckoned with; he is the man behind *The Arrival* (1996), *Pitch Black* (2000) and *The Perfect Getaway* (2009). Twohy excels in crafting storylines that on first blush seem derivative of other pop culture icons (like *The Terminator*) but which, ultimately, carve out a space and feel all their own. *Warlock* is a perfect example of this creative approach, undercutting convention with its heroine's aging dilemma, reversing the *Terminator* premise, and evidencing a real sense of maniacal, chaotic glee in the villainy of the Warlock.

Filmed in 1988, but not released until 1991, the special effects of *Warlock* have not aged well. The wire-work looks woefully clumsy by today's standards, and some of the optical effects are cartoonish. Many of the scenes involving rear-projection appear positively antiquated.

Yet despite all this, *Warlock* remains well-paced, jaunty and droll. The film's success hinges on its troika of interesting characters: a monster out of time, a man in the wrong time, and a woman whose time is running out. Again, it's no wonder that such an inventive movie spawned a franchise. It's just a shame that the sequel eliminates most of the Warlock's history as revealed in this, the original film, and focuses on some silly Druid teenagers.

***Xtro 2: The Second Encounter* * . (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jan Michael Vincent (Dr. Ron Shepherd); Paul Koslo (Dr. Alex Summerfield); Tara Buckman (Dr. Julie Casserly); Jano Frandsen (McShane); Nicholas Lea (Baines); W.F. Wadden (Jedburg); Rolf Reynolds (Zunoski); Nic Amoroso (Mancini); Bob Wilde (Defense Secretary Kenmore); Rachel Hayward (Dr. Myers); Tracy Westerholm (Marshall); Gerry Narn (Ford); Nicola Crosbie (Medic Council); Michael Metcalfe (Dawson); Thom Schioles (Hoffman); Steve Wright (Helicopter Pilot); John McEwen, Harry Jaako (CIA Agents).

CREW: John A. Curtis, Lloyd A Simandl and NAR/EGM Presents a North American Pictures/ Excalibur Pictures Production. *Creature Design:* Charlie Grant, Wayne Dang. *Production Designer:* Glenn Patterson. *Visual Effects:* Cyberflex Films. *Line Producer:* Michael Mazo. *Director of Photography:* Nathaniel Massey. *Film Editor:* Derek Whelan. *Executive Producers:* Lloyd A. Simandl, John A. Curtis, John Eyres, Geoff Griffiths. *Music:* Braun Farnon, Robert Smart. *Screenplay by:*

John A. Curtis, Steven Lister, Robert Smith, Edward Kovach. *Produced by:* Lloyd A. Simandl, John A. Curtis. *Directed by:* Harry Bomley-Davenport. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Under the critical eye of the Defense Secretary (Wilde), Dr. Julie Casserly (Buckman) and Dr. Alex Summerfield (Koslo) of Project Nexus attempt to open a doorway into a parallel universe at their top-secret, subterranean facility. Only one soldier from the exploratory team, Marshall (Westerholm), returns from the parallel universe alive, and a monstrous creature gestates inside of her. Dr. Ron Shepherd (Vincent)—the only man ever to travel to the parallel universe and return in one piece—is called in to assist with a rescue of the other team members, along with a squad of macho soldiers. But before long, the contaminated facility is locked down for radioactive flushing, and an oversized monster is using the air ducts to attack various technicians and scientists. Worse, someone on Project Nexus is infected with another alien...

COMMENTARY: *Xtro 2: The Second Encounter* is one of those familiar modern horror movies that occur almost entirely within darkened control rooms and in oversized vent-shafts. Snarky, testosterone-laden soldiers and arrogant, misguided scientists form the *dramatis personae*, and slobbering monster hides in the ceiling and ducts and pick people off.

In other words, *Xtro 2* is a cheap knock-off of James Cameron's watershed film, *Aliens* (1986). Here, glazed Jan-Michael Vincent portrays the equivalent of Sigourney Weaver's Ripley character: the only person who has first-hand experience with the monster, but who is categorically ignored by everyone in power until it is too late.

As for the "alien" monster, *Xtro* is depicted as a big, rubbery, slimy beast that possesses the same curling, snarling lips, fang-laden mouth and viscous drool as Ridley Scott's famous extra-terrestrial. Maybe *Xtro*'s a distant cousin?

Also familiar: the alien life cycle and predilection for hiding. In *Xtro 2*, the alien bursts out of a human being's chest (!) and immediately seeks refuge in a ceiling grate, where it super-sizes itself into a seven-foot-tall drone.

In slavishly keeping with the *Alien*/*Aliens* template, there's even a human betrayer on "the team." In *Alien*, this role was fulfilled by the scientist/android Ash (Ian Holm), who was protecting the alien for study. In *Aliens*, space yuppie Burke (Paul Reiser) fit the bill. In *Xtro 2*, smarmy Dr. Alex Summerfield (Paul Koslo) hides the fact he is infected with the alien's DNA—he claims he simply "scalded

himself"—and thus manages to jeopardize all the people trapped with him in the underground base.

Even the "parallel universe" landscape depicted in static-laden image in *Xtro 2* is derivative. It looks exactly like the surface of LV-426, the planet of the Space Jockey from *Alien* (1979).

If seeking originality, or even just basic intelligence, one will woefully be disappointed with *Xtro 2*, a derivative sequel which, in fact, bears no connection to the cult hit of 1983. *Xtro* featured an alien visiting Earth to take his son back to outer space. This sequel makes no mention of that alien, his son, or any events of that bizarre eighties movie.

Still, *Xtro 2* incorporates one moderately effective scene set in an elevator shaft, as a heroic soldier Baines, played by *The X-Files*' Nicholas Lea, attempts to set C4 explosives. The *Xtro* monster shows up, and Lea rides the elevator to groundlevel with a boom. Perhaps because Lea is a likable performer, perhaps because runaway elevators are a universal fear, this scene possesses just about more frisson than any other in the movie. The climax, which finds a bored-looking Michael Vincent obliterating the full-sized creature with a grenade launcher on his rifle, is decidedly anticlimactic by comparison.

About the only thing of authentic interest in *Xtro* is the trajectory of the respective male stars. Michael-Vincent was on the way down (way, way down...), and energetic Lea—soon to portray the villainous Krycek on *The X-Files* series, was on his way up. Otherwise, the film lingers on obvious, tone-deaf dialogue, like Vincent's description of the monster as—wait for it—"a life form."

My prescription for this movie is identical to that of the Project Nexus Computer: *radioactive flushing*.

January 8:

President Bush vomits into the lap of Japan's prime minister, Kiichi Miyazawa, and then faints ... all on international television. The scene quickly becomes fodder for late night TV satirists and contributes to the President's image as hapless and weak.

March 30:

Jonathan Demme's serial killer movie The Silence of the Lambs wins Best Picture at the Academy Awards. Jodie Foster and Anthony Hopkins also take home Oscars for their performances in the movie.

April 6:

Microsoft releases Windows 3.1

April 29:

The Los Angeles police officers involved in the Rodney King beating are acquitted of all charges, sparking the Los Angeles riots.

May 19:

The young mistress of Joey Buttafuoco, Amy Fisher—later known as the Long Island Lolita—shoots Joey's wife, Mary Jo Buttafuoco, in the face at point blank range in Massapequa, NY. Mary Jo survives. Amy Fisher becomes a tabloid celebrity, and no less than three TV-movies are produced from her story.

May 22:

Johnny Carson retires as Tonight Show host after thirty years. His preferred successor, David Letterman, is ignored and NBC's choice,

Jay Leno, takes the reins of the series.

June 15:

Vice President Dan Quayle misspells the word potato in front of an elementary school classroom just days after going on the air to attack the CBS sitcom Murphy Brown because the main character has a child out of wedlock.

August 21–22:

In Ruby Ridge, Idaho, a violent confrontation occurs between U.S. Marshals, the F.B.I. and the family of Randy Weaver, presumed to be members of the white supremacist group, Aryan Nation, and militia members.

October 3:

Popular singer Sinéad O'Connor rips up a photo of Pope John Paul II during a performance on Saturday Night Live, sparking a widespread controversy.

October 12:

A Japanese exchange student, Yoshihiro Hattori, is shot dead in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, after accidentally knocking on the wrong door. His killer is acquitted.

November 3:

In a three-way presidential race with incumbent George Bush and Texas millionaire Ross Perot, Democrat Bill Clinton emerges victorious.

December 9:

England's Prince Charles and Princess Diana announce their separation.

Critical Reception

"This third in the *Alien* series continues to explore horror from the matriarchy/ patriarchy skirmish line, which is why it still works long after the thrill of the slime is gone. This installment has a screenplay that is both smart and heartless. It's smart in how it plays on the audience's fears and failings, but mostly it's heartless."—Jami Bernard, *The New York Post*, May 22, 1992, page 27

"It's not just the ultimate duel between Sigourney Weaver's beleaguered Ripley and the kill-crazy-extraterrestrials ... it's about running into the ultimate cul-desac.... It has a different mood than either of its predecessors and a different look: stylish but gloomy, portentously grim.... It drives us into the wall, throws Ripley into a blind alley from which, at last, there is no escape hatch."—Michael Wilmington. *The Los Angeles Times*, 5/22/92, page 1

"*Alien*³ is directed by newcomer David Fincher, known only for his commercials and music videos. His approach is also confrontational, but the style is deliberately claustrophobic, putting the art of the close-up to effective use.... This time, the metaphor is disease, and the monster is likened to a virus.... If the series ends, it ends with some dignity."—James M. Welsh, *Films in Review*, 8/92, page 259

"*Alien*³ is not comfortable, because Ripley is so reduced from the outset. Like all the prisoners on the planet, she has her head shaved. Nor does this film match the rousing battle scenes of Cameron's picture, in which even defeat is handled with panache: In *Aliens*, Jenette Goldstein is awesome as Vasquez, a muscle-packed Latina who does the tango with her weapon. The prisoners in *Alien*³ are, for the most part, whining lowlifes and perverts, and they have no guns. This was David Fincher's debut, so no one was accustomed to his advanced misanthropy or his taste for filming everything through a shit filter. The prison colony feels jaundiced, there are no people to root for, and the intelligent Ripley resorts to suicide as an out. This may not have been all Fincher's fault. He came onboard late and never had a proper chance to rework the script."—David Thomson, *Esquire*, "The Bitch Is Back," December 1997, Volume 128, Issue 6, page

"A weak screenplay is the main problem, playing a group of uninteresting characters against the dull, dreary, background of the all-male penal colony-monastery."— Paul Meehan, *Saucer Movies*, Scarecrow Press, 1999, pages 259–260

"This is a much-maligned film and on its initial release left many wondering what the hell had happened to the franchise. But this is one of those films you have to watch a few times to appreciate. David Fincher's battles with the producers have been well-documented, and never has a film more needed a scale model representation of what its characters were trying to do (think of Doc Brown in the 'Back to the Future' films, showing how the car needed to hit the wire—we needed the same thing here), but his direction showed a lot of style, and Elliott Goldenseal's music is truly outstanding. I think we all wish they hadn't killed off the surviving characters from *Aliens*— that was just dirty pool. But this film ages very nicely, and Fincher's director's cut is an improvement over the studio release. It would take *Alien Resurrection* to show people how bad *Alien*³ wasn't."— William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"Although inferior to its two predecessors, David Fincher's *Alien*³ is often unnecessarily maligned. Yes, much of it is a regurgitation of the original, but Fincher's nascent style is already evident, and fine supporting performances from the likes of Charles Dutton and Pete Postlethwaite help buoy things. One major gripe: Killing off Newt and Hicks before the opening credits is a blatant cop-out from a writing point-of-view."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Sigourney Weaver (Ripley); Charles S. Dutton (Dillon); Charles Dance (Clemons); Paul McGann (Golic); Brian Glover (Andrews); Ralph Brown (Aaron); Danny Webb (Morse); Christopher John Fields (Raines); Lance Henriksen (Bishop 2).

CREW: 20th Century–Fox Presents a Brandywine Production. *Castings:* Priscilla John, Billy Hopkins. *Costume Designers:* Bob Ringwood, David Perry. *Music:* Elliot Goldenthal. *Visual Effects:* Richard Edlund. *Alien Creature Design:* H.R. Giger. *Alien Effects Design Created by:* Alec Gillis and Tom Woodruff, Jr. *Special Effects Supervisor:* George Gibbs. *Film Editor:* Terry Rawlings. *Production Designer:* Norman Reynolds. *Director of Photography:* Alex Thomson. Co-

Producer: Sigourney Weaver. *Executive Producer:* Ezra Swerdlow. *Based on characters created by:* Dan O'Bannon, Ronald Shusett. *Story by:* Vincent Ward. *Written by:* David Giler, Walter Hill, Larry Ferguson. *Produced by:* Gordon Carroll, David Giler, Walter Hill. *Directed by:* David Fincher. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 105 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Aliens cause an electrical fire on the Colonial Marines ship *Sulaco*, en route back to Earth. An EEV carrying Ellen Ripley (Weaver) crash-lands on Fury 161, an all-male penal colony. Ripley's companions, Hicks and little Newt, don't survive the journey, and the android Bishop (Henriksen) is irreparable. Ripley soon learns that the inmates on Fury 161 have given themselves over to an ascetic, fundamentalist Christian lifestyle, led by Dillon (Dutton). When an alien rears its ugly head in the prison, however, Ripley seeks help from Dillon and the staff, including a difficult warden, Andrews (Glover). Unfortunately, there are no weapons on Fury 161, and there is a second alien that grows in secret. As a rescue ship from the Company, *Weyland Yutani*, nears the planet Ripley must make a fateful decision.

COMMENTARY: Up until the year 1992, the *Alien* film series had earned a reputation as the best designed, best performed and most intellectually stimulating of the modern science fiction/ horror film franchises.

Ridley Scott's landmark film *Alien* (1979) initiated the cyberpunk epoch on the silver screen. James Cameron's bang-up, rock-'em, sock-'em sequel, *Aliens* (1986) became the beloved standard-bearer for all genre action spectaculars, extensively copied by films as diverse as *Xtro 2* (1991) and *Carnosaur 2* (1994). With *Alien* and *Aliens*, the film franchise was a one-two punch of unequalled power and horror, a combination of brains and brawn.



The face of terror. Another view of the alien in *Alien*³ (1992).

Then arrived David Fincher's second sequel, *Alien*³ ... and all bets were off.

"It Came from Development Hell!" was the narrative *du jour* by many genre publications back in 1992, and press coverage regarding *Alien*³ focused almost entirely on the production's revolving door of writers and directors rather than the real merits of the final motion picture. The movie went through a stable of writers including Walter Gibson, Eric Red, David Twohy, Joe Fasano, Larry Ferguson, David Giler and Walter Hill, and devoured a handful of directors, among them Renny Harlin and Vincent Ward.

Because of this revolving door, many pundits assumed the resulting fifty million dollar film would prove a disaster. And it is funny how pundits and reviewers tend to fulfill their own expectations—writing the story they wanted to write rather than reacting, objectively, to what the movie actually had to offer.

In the story department, *Alien*³ was indeed drastically altered many times. Development commenced with author William Gibson's concept of a Cold War–style clash in space and ended up, rather unpredictably, with Ripley's adventure on a distant prison planet surrounded by rapists, child molesters and other thugs who had founded a sort of "fundamentalist millenarian" religious cult there.

At one point, even Ripley's presence in the screenplay was an uncertainty until Joe Roth, 20th Century–Fox's then-president, demanded the inclusion of Sigourney Weaver's iconic character.

With Ripley back in the screenplay and then multiple drafts written, a troubled shoot began with newbie director David Fincher—fresh from the world of music videos—at the helm. Almost instantly, rumors of problems sprang up. One set at Pinewood Studios, a giant lead foundry, took some twelve weeks to construct and put the production behind schedule. Even with six-day weeks and fourteen-hour days, there was apparently trouble keeping up.

At one point, Fincher was denied permission by the film's producers to shoot a critical scene in the prison understructure that saw Ripley going face-to-face with the alien and expressing her anger at the long-time nemesis. What did Fincher do? Against orders, he grabbed Sigourney Weaver, a camera, and shot the damned scene anyway. It ended up in the final print, one of the most poignant and often praised moments in *Alien*³.

"You've been in my life so long, I can't remember anything else,"

a frustrated Ellen Ripley argued with the creature in this remarkably intimate scene, a far cry from the guns-and-explosions-approach of *Aliens*.

Still, until Fincher's later films, and his particular, individual "movies should scar" aesthetic came to the forefront of critical opinion, many people simply didn't know how to parse his freshman effort, *Alien*³.

Devout fans of the franchise in particular were outraged by the filmmakers' decision to kill off three popular characters from *Aliens*: Hicks, Newt and Bishop.

Suddenly, Fincher became the Salman Rushdie of *Alien* fans, and aficionados claimed that the 24-year-old wunderkind had single-handedly destroyed a previously unimpeachable franchise with a by-the-number horror sequel lacking all the qualities that had made previous entries such blockbusters.

With all respect to those concerned fans, that assertion is untrue. Fincher directed a visually dazzling film as determinedly different from *Aliens* as Cameron's vision had been from the Scott original. Perhaps more significantly, Fincher created a film with a message more powerful and relevant than either predecessor. What the *Alien* faithful actually objected to in *Alien*³ was not directorial approach, details of plot, or even theme, but Fincher's purposeful overturning of every expectation they had carried into the theater with them.

Appropriately, the film's dialogue echoes the decision to make a surprising, dangerous sequel. The film's lead convict, Dillon (Charles Dutton), gives voice to the film's overall philosophy during a funeral service for the early casualties of *Alien*³. Eulogizing the dead, he declares for the benefit of Ripley and, no doubt, the audience that "there aren't any promises. Nothing's certain. Only that some get called, some get saved." It was this application of cruel, random—but realistic—fate, not some kind of "loyalty" to franchise stock characters that would dominate Fincher's challenging sequel.

What the majority of theater patrons probably found most difficult to stomach in *Alien*³ was the opening sequence, which dramatizes the violent expirations of the little blond child Newt (Carrie Henn) and the likeable marine corporal Hicks (Michael Biehn), two beloved characters from *Aliens*. These losses felt so traumatizing because many fans and critics had displayed hopes for the characters, fantasizing about a scenario that involved Ripley and Hicks becoming lovers and surrogate parents to Newt, while helpful Bishop hovered in the background as a kind of synthetic, all-knowing uncle.

This misguided assumption, that an ad hoc "nice" nuclear family

could dominate an ongoing horror film franchise, did not take into account the savage and Darwinian nature of this particular franchise, which had already witnessed Newt's biological parents and brother being murdered in *Aliens*, and the demise of the macho captain of the *Nostromo*, an alpha male named Dallas (Tom Skerritt), in *Alien*. It was this unreasonable expectation of "family" that was first overturned by the mischief-making Fincher.

In a sequence of rapid-fire quick cuts, *Alien*³ summarily executes the *Aliens* leftovers. Newt drowns in her cryotube. Corporal Hicks is impaled by a falling support beam in the EEV which transports Ripley to Fury 161. Even more ghastly, an early scene in the film highlights Newt's autopsy in the most unflinching, gore-soaked terms conceivable in a major mainstream release, including the use of bloodied bone saws. There goes the family...

The second expectation dashed by *Alien*³ is one that this author terms the "escalation" rule in sequels. Jamie Kennedy's movie-savvy character in *Scream 2* (1997) made the same notation. Sequels must be bigger than the source material and feature what Kennedy called "carnage candy," with "much more elaborate death scenes."

In *Alien*, there was one parasite aboard the *Nostromo* and just a few flamethrowers with which to combat it. In *Aliens*, however, the terror was multiplied. There were hundreds if not thousands of hopping, leaping, spitting aliens and a plethora of glistening weaponry with which to beat them back, including smart rifles, pulse guns, grenade launchers and the ubiquitous flame thrower. The second film was not only a multiplication of outer space horror, but a techie's wet dream filled with sentry drones, missile-bearing drop ships and a military RV with a top-mounted cannon.

It was this jingoistic future chock full of testosterone-laden, space-going marines, that actually converted many folks into fans of the *Alien* franchise in the first place. Odd, however, since LV-426 was very much a Vietnam War metaphor, the colonial marines themselves not unlike the soldiers in Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986). In both films, confident soldiers found themselves battling "so-called" primitives on alien turf, and get their butts kicked for underestimating the enemy.

Considering the geometric progression of horror from *Alien* to *Aliens*, fans expected a third *Alien* film to offer an even grander spectacle with more of *everything*: more aliens, more weaponry and more space grunts. Of course, this was an impossible desire. How could any movie not costing 300 million dollars top *Aliens*? It just wasn't possible.

So instead, Fincher goes a different direction entirely, and fans

get an intensely personal story of an isolated, depressed Ripley trapped on a backwater penal planet, functioning there as a sort of despised outsider or heretic. Instead of copying *Aliens* (which also would have enraged fans, by the way), *Alien³* actually attempts something new and different.

Since Fury 161 houses only dangerous convicts who turned to God in a place that Ripley disparagingly called "the ass end of space," there are no weapons to be found anywhere, except a pair of scissors utilized for comic effect in the film's finale.

Series fans were also confounded because there is only one alien to combat, plus the gestating beastie within Ripley herself. There is no gung-ho expression of American strength or cavalier "Send in the Marines" attitude. The thrill of blasting aliens to hell is replaced by an overwhelming aura of malaise and a graphic concentration on blood and guts. In other words, more realistic, human-scaled violence supplants comicbook, Rambo-style violence in *Alien³*.

Instead of being just another action-packed "Rambolina" like the popular *Aliens*, *Alien³* artfully explores the boundaries and breadth of real heroism. According to Sigourney Weaver in an interview with *Cinefantastique*, the movie concerns the idea of "fighting a common enemy alongside people you don't really like, without guns." To her, this battle defines Ripley's greatest challenge.

Even the amazing set-design of *Alien³* flouts viewer expectations and sequel conventions. In *Aliens*, viewers were treated to lingering, lavish special effects opticals of Gateway Space Station, a terraforming installation on LV-426, the interior of a marine space vessel and other high-tech glories. By contrast, *Alien³* unfolds in a disintegrating prison facility that is more 1940s mental sanitarium than 22nd century glitz.

The prison is a purposefully low-tech environment, lacking video cameras, computers, flashlights, and even condoms, as one helpful prisoner points out. At one point, the convicts light a sewer-like corridor with *rows of candles*. Even the capacity to make fire is in grave doubt, much to Ripley's chagrin. The world portrayed in Fincher's film proves a daring departure from the mechanized, futuristic universe of the film's predecessor.

The next reversal Fincher deals his audience arrives in the stunning, emotionally-wrenching climax. After learning that she is infected with an alien parasite capable of generating thousands more of the monstrosities, Ripley resists the Company's offer to be saved. Fully aware of the consequence, this great heroine of the horror genre dives into a furnace where she and her alien progeny are promptly incinerated.

Ripley, who is so often called "the ultimate survivor," "chooses NOT to survive in *Alien³* so that she can save the universe from the alien queen hiding in her guts.

There is no last minute cop-out, no surgeons racing to rescue Ripley from the terror inside her stomach just in the nick of time, only the grim reality and finality of death and the knowledge that sacrifice has a purpose. Thus the theme of *Alien³*, which elevates it above many genre films, is one of self-sacrifice.

Director Fincher felt this was an important message to impart to audiences in yuppie America, one suffering under the burden of a huge national deficit. Like all good art, *Alien³* speaks relevantly to its historical context. It relates ideally to the early 1990s, the time when presidential candidate Ross Perot called—also unsuccessfully—for sacrifice so as to preserve the future for further generations. As deeply as *Aliens* mirrored the militancy and reckless optimism in technology of the Reagan era, Fincher's *Alien³* reflects the hangover of the Bush recession. An article in *Entertainment Weekly* once described the movie's aura as "bushed."

Perhaps the most devastating crime Fincher could commit after killing Ellen Ripley is to summarily end *Alien³* without the traditional sequel "hook," the tantalizing possibility of another *Alien* film yet to come. Of course, this is precisely the route he takes. Fincher's film ends decisively (and even redundantly) with three separate compositions focusing on heavy metal doors slamming shut with a clang, thus asserting quite literally that there is no door left open for a future sequel. This is it. The trilogy has ended.

Although one of Fincher's greatest accomplishments with *Alien³* is granting the series a noble, honorable and believable ending, this idea was undercut by the release of *Alien Resurrection* in 1997. Still, the denouement must be judged on its own terms. It was designed to be "the end" and it is a notable example of Fincher's brass. He adds something no predecessor had offered the *Alien* franchise: dramatic closure. Finality.

Watching the film a decade later, it is amazing to witness just how well *Alien³* defies viewer expectations. The film opens with the cheerful 20th Century–Fox fanfare that most Generation X viewers associate with the swashbuckling *Star Wars* adventure. It is usually the cue for a grand, uplifting adventure to come. What becomes of this upbeat overture in *Alien³*? Instead of running its course the fanfare stops and hangs on its penultimate note, frozen for a good few seconds ... and then it falls unexpectedly, turning completely and totally sour, even malevolent. Quicker perhaps than any other overt cinematic

technique, this shift in trademark music cue indicates to audiences that nothing, not even a fanfare accompanying a comforting logo, will remain untouched in the hardcore world of *Alien*³.

Beyond his steadfast determination to direct an unpredictable and surprising entry in the *Alien* series, Fincher deserves hosannas for crafting a film of uncommon technical virtue. Much of the film is shot from an extreme low angle, not to suggest the size and power of the protagonists, but to constantly make viewers aware of their vulnerability. The ceiling of the prison, visible in literally hundreds of deep-focus shots, not only reminds audiences that Ripley and the other convicts are trapped inside a decaying institution (a sardine can, essentially), but that the alien strikes from above. The xenomorph clings to the ceiling over the human hustle and bustle, and the continual focus on "what lurks above" Ripley and the others often has viewers scanning the background anxiously, waiting for the next strike.

Regarding the look of *Alien*³, critic John Anderson noted in *Newsday* that "Fincher attains a claustrophobic feel in his shots, which emphasize the vastness around the characters and the feeling that somewhere, just out of sight, something horrible is lurking. And there's nothing you can do about it."¹⁷ *The New York Post's* Jami Bernard agreed with him, writing that *Alien*³ "is smart in how it plays on the audience's fears and failings...."¹⁸

But probably no element of the film is more visually impressive than David Fincher's elaborately-staged climax, a chase set in a massive subterranean complex. The labyrinth is so confusing an arena that the characters themselves, one of whom we are explicitly reminded has an IQ of 85, are unable to navigate it successfully. Naturally, the alien picks the confused men off, one by one.

Although some critics commented that the final chase in the film is a mess because the geography of the lead-works is "confusing," they have missed the point of the action. The exact opposite is true. The men of Fury 161 are not aware of spatial orientation or tactical information any more than the audience is. They aren't trained marines. They aren't soldiers. They aren't even a professional spaceship crew. They're inmates in a deserted installation, and they are lost and disoriented. Fincher's technique mimics Stone's non-traditional battle scenes in *Platoon*, reflecting that this is a war without conventional boundaries, that humans are unequipped to fight. There are no mock-heroics in *Alien*³, just frightened and confused people trying to survive a crisis, running around lost in the dark.

Finally, Fincher lifts up the *Alien* series to a new plane of symbolism and impact with the film's tragic resolution. When the bald Ripley, resembling Maria Falconetti in Carl Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), chooses to sacrifice her life to save humanity, she plunges downward into the industrial-strength furnace in a pose reminiscent of Jesus on the cross.

*Alien*³, according to critic David Ansen, "is thus a quasi religious passion play with Sigourney Weaver as Ripley, head-shaved, offering to martyr herself to save the world from the sins of the monster ... [so] credit Fincher for taking risks."¹⁹

The religious parallel is as meaningful and as powerful as Ansen suggests. Ripley, like Christ, sacrifices her life to preserve humanity's future. "With her shaven head and her director's predilection for unflinching close-ups, Ripley radiates passion like an SF Joan of Arc, searching the furthest reaches of her alien battered soul for any remaining sparks of faith, hope and grace to sustain her through yet another ordeal,"²⁰ wrote *New Statesman and Society's* Anne Billson, acknowledging that *Alien*³ is the first franchise film to operate on a genuinely spiritual level.

It is this final act of *Alien*³ that brings the saga into crystal clarity for perhaps the first time. Ripley, the ultimate survivor, overcomes her personal (and some might say selfish) desire to live (*Alien*), bear children (*Aliens*) and find happiness, so that all humanity can survive. This existential moment of truth far surpasses the more popular but comparatively facile "dueling maternal instincts" battle in *Aliens* and successfully apotheosizes the character. The Christ analogy transforms Ripley's final decision—essentially suicide—into a beautiful act rather than a cowardly one.

At least one critic saw *Alien*³ as tackling another major issue, in this case, reproductive freedom. "If nothing else, *Alien*³ surely qualifies as one of the ten most bizarre movies ever made about a woman's right to choose,"²¹ opined J. Hoberman in *The Village Voice*. Growing a new life inside her, Ripley must make a choice about the nature of that life. Others want her to carry the baby to term (namely Bishop), but it is her body that protects and nourishes the baby, the monster in this case, and so, rightly, Ripley selects the path for its future. In the process, she loses her life but gains the universe.

Because David Fincher so expertly defies sequel expectations, *Alien*³ often leaves viewers (and especially *Alien* fans) feeling lost and rudderless. Not incidentally, this is the perfect frame of mind in which to be throttled by a state-of-the-art, existential horror film. The rejection of convention, the rejection of safety, the rejection of

predictability establishes the film's uneasy mood perfectly and leaves one discomforted. Furthermore this approach assures that *Alien*³—love it or hate it—is never merely an uninspired copy of earlier franchise films. In this way, the threequel actually gains a foothold on immortality like the other movies. No one can ever accuse it of going where Ripley has gone before.

***Amityville 1992: It's About Time* * * (DTV)**

Critical Reception

"Tony Randel is a talented director who seems perpetually cursed with lackluster material."—John Bowen, *Rue Morgue*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Stephen Macht (Jacob Sterling); Shawn Weatherly (Andrea); Megan Ward (Lisa); Damon Martin (Rusty); Jonathan Penner (Leonard); Nita Talbot (Mrs. Whaler); Dick Miller (Mr. Anderson); Dean Cochran (Andy); Terrie Snell (Mrs. Tetmann); Kevin Bourland (Officer #1); Margarita Franco (Officer #2); William B. Jackson (Officer #3); Alan Berman (Van Driver); Dylan Milo (Baby Rusty).

CREW: *Casting:* Robin Monroe. *Costume Designer:* Randall Thropp. *Music:* Daniel Licht. *Film Editor:* Rick Finney. *Director of Photography:* Christopher Taylor. *Production Designer:* Kim Hix. *Executive Producers:* Steve White, Barry Bernardi. *Story by:* John G. Jones. *Written by:* Christopher DeFaria, Antonio Toro. *Produced by:* Christopher DeFaria. *Directed by:* Tony Randel. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Architect Jacob Sterling (Macht) brings home to California an antique clock, unaware that it is from the haunted Amityville house in Long Island. The clock begins to cause strange changes in Jacob's family. His daughter Lisa (Ward) becomes dangerously promiscuous, and Jacob himself grows paranoid and dangerous. Only Jacob's son Rusty (Damon Martin) and Jacob's girlfriend Andrea (Weatherly) suspect that true evil has taken up residence in their sunny tract home.

COMMENTARY: It's about time, all right. Time someone put a stake

right through the *Amityville Horror* franchise's barely-beating heart. The 1979 original film was powerfully scary, a cautionary tale, at least according to author Stephen King, about the financial perils of home ownership. The 1981 sequel *The Possession* had a creepy, unsavory feel too, but after that modest entry, everything went downhill fast.

A 1983 3-D sequel reeked of desperation and gimmickry, and in the 1990s the franchise moved from theatrical fare to direct-to-video cheesiness with a lame twist right out of *Friday the 13th: The Series* (1987–1991). The Amityville house may be dead and gone, but its belongings are cursed objects and causing mischief anyway. Thus audiences are treated to stories concerning haunted clocks, haunted mirrors, and a haunted dollhouse. Where's Robey when you need her?

In *Amityville: It's About Time*, it is the Sterling family that reckons with the problem of Dad's latest acquisition: the Amityville clock. Once carried over the threshold of the family abode, the device promptly extends metal claws from its mechanical body and permanently attaches itself to the living room mantel and hearth.

Over the course of the film, the sinister clock (without moving from its position) infects everything and everyone around it with evil. It reshapes matter by turning the living room into an exact duplicate of a room in the Long Island Amityville house. Without hands—or even paint for that matter—it spray-paints a swastika on the garage next door (now the Amityville evil is anti- Semitic too?).

It also creates scary hallucination for Andrea's new boyfriend, Leonard, turns the adolescent Sterling daughter (Megan Ward) into a self-fondling seductress, and assumes control of a truck on the street outside so it can run over a nice old lady who might be able to help the family.

Then the clock sucks the daughter's horny boyfriend right into the house's floorboards, winds itself backwards and reverts the Sterling boy, Rusty, to childhood. Then the clock superages Andrea into decrepitude by winding itself ahead. Finally, when the clock is destroyed, the universe obligingly resets itself and time goes back to the point that Dad first brought the clock home.

In short, this haunted clock may just be the most powerful villain ever to be featured in a horror movie: capable of bending time, space and matter to its inanimate, arbitrarily evil will. If such a clock existed in the Amityville House, you wonder how anybody ever defeated the dark forces there and why the house ended up being destroyed. The clock could just turn back time to a point when the house existed, reshape the house after it was ruined, or hit the reboot button altogether.

At the very least (since it can control objects far away from it, like trucks), the clock could harass the former residents who escaped the house and did it harm. Even paint graffiti on their walls, just to be obnoxious.

On some level, *Amityville: It's About Time* concerns the disintegration of the American family. Dad's punishment for being away all the time is that he becomes consumed by his work as an architect, obsessed with the design and blueprint of the Amityville House. Daughter Lisa is fouled up by her burgeoning adolescent sexuality, which the clock manipulates to turn her into a whore. And Rusty, the idiot man-child, literally becomes a child again. Everyone has a characteristic that gets exploited and which upsets the delicate domestic balance.

Only Andrea, Dad's girlfriend, has the wherewithal to fight the clock. The best scene in the film involves this character's actions, after the final reboot. Dad returns home, with the clock *again*, and, without words, Andrea smashes it, and then leaves the family permanently. She doesn't explain, she doesn't look back, she doesn't apologize.

She's had enough. And really, who can blame her?

Army of Darkness * * *

Critical Reception

"It's a fun film in a different way from the way that *Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn* was fun, but at some point this film wandered a little too far from its roots. *Evil Dead* was scary. *Evil Dead 2* was funny, but had a few scares. By the third film, it seemed Raimi had forgotten this was a horror series, and as much as we all like Ray Harryhausen's work, it didn't need homage in this franchise. Come on, Sam— make one more good scary film. This wasn't it. Hopefully, the *Xena* part of his career is long over, with *Spider-Man* putting it all well behind us. Raimi went a little too far off the beaten path on this one."—William Latham, author *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"I'm not among the legions of unquestioning lovers of this third *Evil Dead* installment. Maybe it's because I was expecting something a little less comedic and a little more horrific—more the balance that's found in *Evil Dead 2*, for example. It provides a

lot of scenery for Bruce Campbell to chew, and is an impressive Harryhausen homage, but ultimately is a letdown as a concluding chapter in the Deadite saga."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bruce Campbell (Ash); Embeth Davidtz (Sheila); Marcus Gilbert (Arthur); Ian Abercrombie (Wiseman); Richard Grove (Duke Henry); Michael Earl Reid (Gold Tooth); Bridget Fonda (Linda); Patricia Tallman (Possessed Witch); Ted Raimi (Cowardly Warrior); Timothy Patrick Quill (Blacksmith); Billy Bryan (Pit Bitch); Bill Moseley (Deadite Captain); Michael Kenney (Henry's Man).

CREW: Universal Pictures, Dino De Laurentiis Communications and Renaissance Pictures present *Army of Darkness*. *Casting:* Ira Belgrade. *Production Designer:* Tony Tremblay. *Book of the Dead Animation and Design:* Tom Sullivan. *Costume Designer:* Ida Gearon. *Art Director:* Aram Allan. *Visual Effects:* Introvision International and William Mesa, director of Effects. *Music composed and conducted by:* Joseph Lo Duca. *March of the Dead Theme:* Danny Elfman. *Director of Photography:* Bill Pope. *Film Editors:* Sonny Baskin, Bob Murawski, R.O.C. Sandstorm. *Co-Producer:* Bruce Campbell. *Produced by:* Robert Tapert. *Directed by:* Sam Raimi. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 81 minutes.

INCANTATION: "Sam delighted in watching Bruce's performance, and the more Bruce would kid the material, the bigger Bruce would get, the more excited Sam got. Now, I thought that was curious, because everybody else in the movie was taken, for the most part, 100 percent seriously. I always felt there was a divergence of style in the film. Bruce's style of acting in the film didn't match the style of others. However, his style of acting matched all the effects; matched all the monster characters perfectly. The movie works."²²—Actor Richard Grove, *Army of Darkness*.

SYNOPSIS: S-Mart employee and smart ass Ash (Campbell) is transported to the year 1300 by the mystical powers of the Necronomicon, the Book of the Dead. In that time period, King Arthur's men capture Ash and come to believe that the twentieth-century man is the "Chosen One," the legendary warrior who can protect the people from the multiplying evil of the Deadites. Forging a peace between Arthur and his enemy, Duke Henry (Grove), Ash sets out to train a crack team of castle defenders before the Army of the Dead marches. Leading the advance, unfortunately, is an evil version

of Ash. If Ash hopes to get back home to the twentieth century, he must defeat the Deadites and protect the Book of the Dead.

COMMENTARY: Only the subversive screen magician Sam Raimi could create a horror film that so audaciously blends elements of Mark Twain's 1889 novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* with Three Stooges-style humor, Ray Harryhausen styled special effects ... and huge dollops of gore.

And there's only one actor in the world that could possibly star in such a vehicle as the selfsatisfied, smarmy Ash: the newly-buff Chin himself and Raimi's favorite punching bag: horror icon Bruce Campbell.

Army of Darkness, which really, really should have been titled *The Medieval Dead*, is surely one of the weirdest and wildest horror movies and horror sequels ever produced. Completing the transition begun in *Evil Dead 2* (1987), however, *Army of Darkness* accentuates heavily the humorous aspects of the tale, often at the expense of scares. Yet the film is so fast-moving and brazenly silly, you can hardly catch your breath long enough to care.

Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* focused on the unlikely adventures of a Yankee industrialist, Hank Morgan, who travels through time from his mechanical factory in Hartford to King Arthur's court in the year 528 A.D. He escapes execution by the state only because of his accurate prediction that an eclipse is soon to occur.



Taste his Boomstick! Ash (Bruce Campbell) returns in *Army of Darkness* (1992).

Granted a reprieve, Morgan becomes ensconced as Merlin's righthand man, and in no time introduces guns, explosives, bicycles, and even telephones to the unenlightened folk of the sixth century. The novel's thesis, according to scholar William Dean was to dramatize "a New Deal for the downtrodden common people—transforming Arthur's England into a technically efficient state in which gunpowder and mechanical skills triumph over superstition, injustice and oppression."²³

Concocted a century later by sibling writing team of Sam and Ivan Raimi, *Army of Darkness* is an irreverent but not entirely unfaithful version of the classic Twain tale ... only without some of the

higher aspirations and socially valuable text.

Army of Darkness is more, *An SMart Average Guy in King Arthur's Court*, but you get the point. Here, Ash is catapulted back in time to 1300, where he meets a king also named Arthur, and introduces new technology, including gunpowder and a modern vehicle—his death coaster—to the superstitious denizens. A Merlin-like character, Ian Abercrombie's Wiseman, also plays a critical role in *Army of Darkness*, and in both stories this fellow boasts the capacity to return the hero to his correct time period. Attitudes, of course, are different in the two stories. *No New Deal from Ash, baby*. He takes on his task of educating the knightly yokels with disdain and condescension.



Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war. Three views of Deadite attack in *Army of Darkness*.

Raimi may have adapted and modified the *Connecticut Yankee* template because, as he has explained on occasion, he sought to take the concept of "technology versus the supernatural" further than ever before, and the book offered a nearperfect prototype for that tale, albeit with different villains. *Army of Darkness* features an encore appearance from the *Evil Dead*'s Lovecraftian Deadites rather than Twain's choice of villain: a socially unjust and superstitious Catholic Church. But how 20th century brethren Ash and Hank save the day is virtually identical: through the careful application of modern technology. Good thing Ash brought along a science textbook in his car trunk...

Army of Darkness features other notable antecedents too. In its relatively brief running time, the Raimi film references a dozen classics of stage, page and screen. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is recalled during a scene set inside a windmill, wherein Ash is attacked by a dozen tiny versions of himself ... and they bind him.

The stop-motion-styled effects used to depict the army of Deadites purposely pay tribute to such Harryhausen classics as *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) and *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* (1958). The magic words of the Necronomicon "Klaatu Barada Nikto" are an allusion to *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), and the final battle between Ash and the enemy general on a rampart recalls, cleverly, the staircase duel in Michael Curtiz's *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1983).

Even the movie's title card humorously reads "Bruce Campbell vs. the Army of Darkness" and this phraseology evokes memories of a defunct Hollywood tradition of actor's names included in titles, like *Bela Lugosi Meets a Brooklyn Gorilla* (1952) or *The Bowery Boys Meet the Monsters* (1954).

But if the movie is a tour of literary and movie history, it's one conducted, intentionally, by the approving spirit of the Three Stooges. When Ash is called upon to steal the Necronomicon, for instance, skeletal hands rise from the ground and poke his eyes, smash his cheeks, pull his tongue and otherwise abuse him. Action scenes descend quickly to slapstick and Raimi even has Ash utter Stooge-ish empty threats. "Oh you ... why I oughta..." etc.

From a visual standpoint, Raimi augments the humor quotient of *Army of Darkness* by using standard camera techniques and then stretching them out to absurd lengths. An early scene in the film involves a pan across a crowd in Arthur's courtyard. The extras pivot as the camera pans by them, gazing at something off-screen. This shot soon encompasses a line of a dozen or so people, until the camera at long list pinpoints Ash, who is to be cast into the monster pit. The shot is timed for comedy, not horror, as we go by one querulous face after another, until the camera finds its target. Consider: a pan is most frequently used to convey information about something nearby in space, but not here. Here, it just keeps going and going, and the effect is that it gets a laugh.

Another example: trapped inside a windmill, Ash yells madly as an unseen Deadite force pounds on the door. But then the sound effects and scary music suddenly drop off the soundtrack, and Campbell is left screaming all alone, with no sounds. He's made to look like an idiot, not a hero.

The early 1990s saw the release of a number of horror comedies

or comedy horrors, depending on your perspective (including titles like *Prom Night 3: The Last Kiss*, *Gremlins 2: The New Batch*, *Basket Case 3: Progeny*, and *Highway to Hell*), yet few of them are as funny or as technically accomplished as is *Army of Darkness*. While one can always wish for a horror film as serious as *The Evil Dead* to round out Raimi's trilogy, *Army of Darkness* is, like every film, a product of its times. Horror movies were turning inward in the 1990s, holding up a mirror to themselves and becoming increasingly self-reflexive. *Army of Darkness* looks at itself, movie history, and even the convention of the square-jawed hero and appropriately finds much to laugh about.

***Basic Instinct* * * ***

Critical Reception

"Verhoeven's film is fascinating, if stupid and stylish, if shallow. The story has to move along at a fair clip because otherwise we'd notice how nonsensical it all is. And there is very little to connect with emotionally. The characters are simply unattractive."—Kathleen Maher, *The Austin Chronicle*, March 27, 1992. <http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Calendar/Film?Film=oid%3A138836>

"Verhoeven's lurid thriller has moments of welcome self-parody, but most of the action manages to be sensationalistic, homophobic, and tedious at the same time."—David Sterritt, *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 20, 1992, Arts, page 12

"*Basic Instinct* is almost delirious in celebrating the absence of ethics.... Stone here is the ultimate bad girl, flaunting her transgressive power at every turn."—J. Hoberman, *The X-List: The National Society of Film Critics' Movies That Turn Us On*, "*Basic Instinct*, a Geyser of Pathology," Da Capo, 2005, page 29

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michael Douglas (Nick Curran); Sharon Stone (Catherine Trammell); George Dzundza (Gus); Jeanne Tripplehorn (Dr. Elizabeth Gardner); Denis Arndt (Lt. Walker); Chelcie Ross (Captain Talcott); Wayne Knight (John Corelli); Daniel Von Bargen (Nilsen); Leilani Sarelle (Roxy); Dorothy Malone (Hazel Dobkins); Bruce A. Young

(Andrews); Bill Cable (Jimmy Boz); Jack McGee (Sheriff).

CREW: Carolco/Mario Kassar Present a Le Studio production of a Paul Verhoeven film. *Casting:* Howard Feuer. *Costume Designer:* Ellen Mirojnick. *Music:* Jerry Goldsmith. *Film Editor:* Frank J. Urioste. *Production Designer:* Terence Marsh. *Director of Photography:* Jan De Bont. *Written by:* Joe Ezterhas. *Produced by:* Alan Marshall. *Directed by:* Paul Verhoeven. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 129 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A cop under investigation in San Francisco by Internal Affairs, Nick Curran (Douglas), is brought in to investigate the bloody murder of a rock star and club owner, Johnny Boz (Cable). Boz was murdered during the throes of passion, while bound by a white scarf to his bed post. And the murder weapon was an ice pick. Johnny's wealthy girlfriend, Catherine Trammell (Stone), is the prime suspect, especially since she has written a book called *Love Hurts* in which a former rock star dies exactly the same way as Johnny did. As Nick falls under the seductive Catherine's spell, he also learns that his police psychologist and former girlfriend, Beth (Tripplehorn), has a secret history with her.

COMMENTARY: So, is *Basic Instinct* really, really, really a horror movie? Well, it depends on what the meaning of "is" is, right?

Here we have a police procedural (the preferred format of many horror films of the 1990s), an ice-pick wielding serial killer who gorily offs victims, and a self-reflexive tenor that acknowledges the connection between literary fiction— Trammell's trashy crime books—with the murders portrayed in the film.

Furthermore, the charismatic, loquacious Catherine Trammell fits in perfectly with the decade's pattern of talkative, charismatic, larger-than-life villains like Max Cady, Hannibal Lecter or even Mrs. Tingle. Unquestionably, the movie falls within the parameters of the interloper paradigm too. Specifically, a writer insinuates herself into the life of troubled Nick Curran so as to "use" his life as fodder for her latest novel.

In Catherine's process of using him, Nick's life is all but ruined. His partner Gus (Dzundza) gets brutally murdered, he is accused of murder himself, and Curran is also suspended from active duty. Adding insult to injury, the interloper Trammell drops Nick like a hot potato once she's finished writing her latest tome (called *Shooter*). This is not only the behavior of a 1990s interloper, it's a clever commentary on writers in general, who are known for picking up and then dropping obsessions and targets of research while jobbing from project to project. Only here, Catherine's project involves lots and lots

of sex.

Like *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Basic Instinct* relishes the method by which its primary monster communicates. In the Demme film, Hannibal Lecter and Clarice Starling shared several tête-à-têtes, one-on-one-interviews that established Lecter's diabolical intellect and verbal prowess. In similar fashion, Catherine Trammell holds court in a police interrogation room, wearing no underwear, and evades all attempts by the authorities to blame her or prosecute her for murder. This sequence is likely one of the most famous and parodied in movie history, in part because of Stone's scintillating, virtuoso performance, in part because she's wearing no underwear. But the point is not dissimilar from *Lambs*: Trammell is a celebrity villain, a monster who does not "hide." As Dr. Gardner notes with indignation, Trammell is "evil" ... and "brilliant."

Stone makes the most of this character, creating a strutting, dangerous femme-fatale for the ages. Icy and remote at times, Stone creates a character that is always in control, even when pretending to be weak.

Uniquely, there's no empirical evidence in *Basic Instinct* that Catherine Trammell is actually a murderess. Those around her—from her lesbian lover Roxy to rocker Johnny Boz, from her unfortunate parents to her first husband Manny—certainly have a knack for turning up dead. But in each instance, Catherine appears to have an alibi.

What the film implicitly suggests instead is that a college fling, a lesbian "experiment" at Berkeley, is actually the impetus for the murders. It's an ongoing game between Beth and Catherine: both psychology majors, both game players.

Back at school in the 1980s, Beth "singlewhite-female" Catherine, even changing her hair to become a blond, like her obsession. Now, Beth is apparently committing murder and blaming Catherine for the crimes.

Or Catherine is committing murder and setting up Beth.

The movie never clarifies, precisely. This uncertainty makes the film an interesting puzzle that is rewarding to return to. Each time you watch the film, you pick up another detail, another clue about the crimes.

There's a perfectly valid reading of the film, for instance, in which Catherine is being totally honest about her interest/fascination with killers, but in which she does not happen to be one of them. She just uses their lives to write books. This reading also includes Nick by

the way: he is guilty of killing several innocent civilians while high, although he never sees how he fits in to the overall pattern.

Upon its theatrical release, *Basic Instinct* drew the attention and ire of some gay activists for portraying Catherine, Elizabeth and Roxy all as would-be murderers. They feared that audiences would conclude that all lesbians were ice pick killers, apparently.

Although Roxy is clearly depicted as a murderer, the story with Catherine is much less clearcut. It is plain she indulges in all sorts of passions, from smoking, to cocaine, to heterosexual sex to homosexual sex, but she is not strictly a lesbian, so the anger of the gay community is misplaced.

The film also features Michael Douglas as a "totally average fucked-up cop," one who falls off the wagon, shoots innocent people, boozes it up, and snorts cocaine. Yet there were no police activists complaining about *Basic Instinct's* depiction of them.

As was the case with Friedkin's *Cruising* (1981), it's much ado about nothing. *Basic Instinct* isn't out to draw any conclusions about any one demographic; it's out to tantalize, transgress, and titillate. These three goals it accomplishes in spades.

Like many 1990s films, *Basic Instinct* intentionally blurs the line between thriller and horror. Part of the problem in classifying the film arises from the film's determined, highly-sized sense of ambiguity about its colorful, larger-than-life "monster." Catherine is either a serial killer or she's not. She either wrote her books as alibis, or someone else is using her books as "how to" manuals for murder.

Even the final shot of the film—of an ice pick under the bed—is not exactly conclusive of Catherine's guilt. Someone else, someone like Beth, could have put it there to frame her. Is she really reaching for it in that final scene, or is there something else going on in her "devious, diabolical mind?"

In a particular nineties sort of way, Stone's Catherine Trammell is a monster no one can agree is a monster. She might just be a really, really sexy seductress.

Or she might be an ice-pick wielding psychopath.

***Basket Case 3: Progeny* * 1/2**

CAST: Kevin Van Hentenryck (Duane Bradley); Gil Roper (Sheriff); Tina Louise Hilbert (Opal); Dan Biggers (Uncle Hal); Jim O'Doherty (Little Hal); Jackson Faw (Bailey); Jim Grimshaw (Baxter); Annie Ross (Granny Ruth); Jeff Winter (Renaldo); Tim Warle (Brannon); Jerry G. White (Banner); Beverly Bonner (Fast Food Manager); Rick Smailes (Elmo).

CREW: Shapiro Glickenhau Entertainment Presents an Ievins/Henenlotter Production. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Frank K. Isaac. *Casting:* Annette Stillwell. *Production Designer:* William Barclay. *Film Editor:* Greg Sheldon. *Creature and Make-up Effects:* Gabe Bartalos, David Kindlor. *Music:* Joe Renzetti. *Director of Photography:* Bob Paone. *Executive Producer:* James Glickenhau. *Written by:* Frank Henenlotter Robert Martin. *Produced by:* Edgar Ievin. *Directed by:* Frank Henenlotter. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Months after his breakdown at Granny Ruth's (Ross), Duane (Van Henentryck) claims to be sane again. Released from his padded cell in Ruth's basement, he learns that Belial will soon be a father. With Duane in tow, the freaks take a bus trip to Peachtree Valley, Georgia, where a trustworthy surgeon can oversee Eve's difficult labor and delivery. But once there, the freaks find that greed and fear are universal human qualities.

COMMENTARY: The world of Belial and Duane gets wackier in *Basket Case 3: Progeny*, but that's not necessarily a good thing for horror fans. *Basket Case* (1981) was a sleazy, out-and-out horror classic and the second film in the trilogy, much less so. Still, part II was occasionally interesting, even as it veered towards overt fantasy and silliness. In the third entry, however, the fantastic and comedic angles of the franchise completely dominate everything else.

So, Granny Ruth gets to perform a musical number on the bus trip to Georgia, belting out "Personality" while her freak entourage joins in. So, Granny Ruth gets to buy condoms for her freaks at a drug store stop, and then take them to lunch at McDonalds. So, Belial's wife Eve pops out a dozen little Belials in a comical birthing sequence, and so on. *The Basket Case* series has become high camp, and it's not pretty. It's almost unwatchable.

Make no mistake, Henenlotter is still using the franchise for social criticism, here delving into the 1990s phenomenon of trash talk/tabloid TV with the presence of a host named "Renaldo" (think Geraldo Rivera), and a program dedicated to "Freaks and the Women Who Love Them." This is mildly amusing stuff aimed at a deserving target, but once more the freaks are so ridiculous-looking and over-the-

top that it's almost impossible to believe in this as anything approaching reality. Also, the central Duane and Belial relationship takes a back-seat this time to freak antics, even though Belial, in an interesting twist, is transformed into a buzz saw–equipped cyborg.

Progeny may also be a commentary on human avarice, with renegade Southern cops interested in pursuing a million dollar reward for "The Times Square Freaks," and protective Belial making that personal transformation in order to rescue his kidnapped freak-lings. Even as such, *Progeny* is too silly to please the dedicated horror aficionado, and too violent to be genuinely comic.

It's worse than that: the movie goes on interminably and fails to entertain on even the most basic level. *Basket Case 3* is a sad end for the series, a cartoon, camp version of something that, at first, was lurid, dangerous and daring.

***The Boneyard* * * .**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Ed Nelson (Detective Jersey Callum); Deborah Rose (Alley Cates); Norman Fell (Willie Shepherd); Jim Eustermann (Gordon Mullin); Denise Young (Dana); Willie Stratford, Jr. (Marty); Phyllis Diller (Mrs. Poopinplatz); Robert Yun Ju Ahn (Mr. Chen); Rick Brophy (Mao); Sallie Middleton (Little Ghoul); Janice Dever (Medium Ghoul); Cindy Dollar Smith (Big Ghoul)

CREW: Prism Entertainment and Backbone Productions Ltd. Present a Backwood Film, *The Boneyard*. *Art Director:* Carl "Chip" Anderson. *Music:* Johnny Lee Whitener. *Executive Producer:* Jeffrey San Filippo. *Director of Photography:* Irl Dixon. *Produced by:* Richard F. Brophy. *Written and directed by:* Jamie Cummins. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Police detective Callum (Nelson) recruits the overweight, burned-out psychic expert Alley Cates (Rose) to help him investigate a strange case involving three dead children, a mortuary, and an ancient Oriental curse regarding the undead. Along with young detective Mullin (Eustermann), the reluctant Alley and Callum visit the local morgue to look at the three corpses, only for Alley to experience a vision of the dead children as flesh-eating ghouls. Before long, the ghouls are up and stalking, threatening everyone in the building,

including the coroner, Willie (Fell), the annoying night manager, Mrs. Poopinplatz (Diller), and even her poodle. While the ghouls make a feast of the corpses in the morgue, one of the monsters also force feeds Poopinplatz a piece of its own ghoulish skin...

COMMENTARY: Do you know that old saying that goes "it's not over until the fat lady sings?" In the case of *The Boneyard*, the movie isn't over until the fat lady throws a pipe-bomb at a gigantic, slobbering poodle ghoul, accompanied by the epithet "Fetch *this!*"

Then, it's over.

Of course, by that point, you might be wishing that weren't actually the case because the lowbudget *The Boneyard* is a relatively ingenious, scary, and occasionally funny horror film about three hungry child ghouls running amok in "sub level 3" (nudge, nudge, fans of James Cameron's *Aliens*) of a city morgue and thereby imperiling the likes of Phyllis Diller (a character who has been on the night shift at the morgue since "Year One") and Norman Fell, who sports a ponytail here.

At one point, Ms. Diller's character, the unfortunately named Mrs. Poopinplatz, is transformed into a ghoul herself, and the movie creates a genuine monstrosity out of her: a nine-foot-tall Phyllis Diller ghoul with bulging, ping-pong ball eyes and a wild mane of snow white hair. It's a ridiculous and unnerving sight, but Johnny Lee Whitener's pulse-pounding score helps augment the film's sense of terror, even at such ridiculous junctures.

There were a lot of really terrible low budget horror movies released in the 1990s (including *Syngeonor*, to name one wretched example), but for all its wackiness, *The Boneyard* avoids the common mistakes. First, it plays as a relatively straight horror film, keeping the self-referential humor in check and maintaining even the giant poodle's sense of menace. Secondly, the film exhibits a real unconventional streak, as if it's rebelling against the clichés of the form.

Take Alley Cates, the film's psychic, played by Deborah Rose. She's an obese, older woman, and not very attractive in the slightest. In fact, to call her plain is probably to exaggerate. But it takes some courage to put an obese, older, notvery-attractive woman in the lead of a horror movie, at least if she's not Kathy Bates, doesn't it?

And then, the movie doesn't ignore her unglamorous appearance or weight either. Poopinplatz takes one look at Alley's driver's license photograph and says to the overweight woman, "porked out, didn't we?" Later, she ungraciously calls her a fat bitch. Wow.

Then, during *The Boneyard's* climactic escape from the basement, the ample Alley climbs up a ladder to a vent shaft, and gets stuck. She's too fat too pass. And behind her, that giant poodle ghoul looms ever closer...

Again, this just isn't something you see every day, and I don't want to give the impression that it is done in an obvious or jokey way, either. Alley's life is on the line, and she struggles for her life as a drooling over-sized poodle barks at her. By this time, you're invested in the character's survival and are watching with avid interest. But simultaneously, you're also noting from a distance the utter ridiculousness of the scenario: a fat lady climbing a ladder so as to outrun a monster poodle.

The Boneyard doesn't skimp on thrills and chills. The score by Johnny Lee Whitener augments the action, and the movie features some disgusting scenes of the ghouls eating human flesh and forcefeeding their ghoul flesh to humans (like Diller). In one disturbing scene, a ghoul—who still seems to be a child—torments the survivors with her little dolly, and that's just all kinds of weird. Another scene establishes that the ghouls are smart enough to use tools (and elevator keys) and there's real suspense generated during a scene in which Allie comes to realize that the "corpses" of the ghouls are not so dead after all.

The sad thing about some of the horror films of the 1990s is that so many simply fly on autopilot, not thinking about the conventions they use, just mindlessly repeating them. *The Boneyard* may not be a masterpiece, and it occasionally missteps into silliness, but at least here you get the sense that there's an active intelligence at work behind the film, noting the absurdities, playing with the form, and intent on scaring you. That makes all the difference.

***Bram Stoker's Dracula* * * ***

Critical Reception

"Opulent, reasonably faithful, but over-directed version of the oft-told story which manages to turn up every visual cliché in the book."—Howard Maxford, *The A-Z of Horror Films*, Indiana University Press, 1997

"I'm still astounded by the number of otherwise learned and

level-headed film critics who gushed over this overblown, laughable wank job. In fact, I'm also astounded by the smaller number who gave it even fair-to-middling ratings"— John Bowen, *Rue Morgue*

"There are so many positive things to say about what is ultimately a disappointing film, mostly due to false advertising—this is not *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (watch Louis Jourdan if you want that)—this is an auteur's interpretation of a classic work that is labeled as a faithful adaptation of the classic work, and somewhere in there is a big fat lie worse than anything Michael Corleone ever told his wife Kay. It's a beautiful film to watch with wonderful use of color, and Gary Oldman is certainly fine as Dracula. Anthony Hopkins chews up the scenery to an almost Vincent Price degree. The young cast, perhaps too young, changes the tone of Stoker's story to almost a teen film and that is to its detriment. The effects, most of them done in camera rather than on a computer screen, show that Hollywood can still mystify without resorting to pixel editors, but anyone who's ever read Stoker's original will tell you—this isn't Dracula. Perhaps its Vlad the Impaler made immortal. This film drips Francis Ford Coppola—it just doesn't drip Bram Stoker."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"I saw this thing a total of six times when it first came out. And although over the years my adoration of it has come down a notch or two, I continue to be enthralled by Oldman's portrayal of the Count, as well as the rich, vibrant set design, costume design and cinematography. A beautiful, if somewhat overly selfindulgent film."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Gary Oldman (Count Dracula); Winona Ryder (Mina Murray/Elisabeta); Anthony Hopkins (Professor Abraham Van Helsing); Keanu Reeves (Jonathan Harker); Richard E. Grant (Dr. Jack Seward); Cary Elwes (Lord Arthur Holmwood); Bill Campbell (Quincey P. Morris); Sadie Frost (Lucy Westenra); Tom Waits (Renfield); Monica Bellucci, Michaela Bercu, Florina Kendrick (Brides of Dracula)

CREW: Columbia Pictures Presents an American Zoetrope/Osiris Films Productions. *CASTING:* Victoria Thomas. *Co-Producers:* James V. Hart, John Veitch. *Visual Effects:* Roman Coppola. *Costumes:* Eiko Ishioka. *Music:* Wojciech Kilar. *Film Editors:* Nicholas C. Smith, Glen

Scantlebury, Anne Goursaud. *Production Design*: Thomas Sanders. *Director of Photography*: Michael Ballhaus. *Executive Producers*: Michael Apted, Robert O'Connor. *Produced by*: Francis Ford Coppola, Fred Fuchs, Charles Mulvehill. *Directed by*: Francis Ford Coppola. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 123 minutes.

INCANTATION: "The emphasis will be on the story."—Producer Chuck Mulvehill describes his perception of *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. ²⁴

SYNOPSIS: In 1897, young English clerk Jonathan Harker (Reeves) travels to the castle of strange Count Dracula (Oldman) in Transylvania to arrange the real estate purchase of Carfax Abbey in London. Dracula spies a photograph of Mina Murray (Ryder), Harker's fiancée, and realizes that she is the reincarnation of his lost love, beloved Elisabeta. With Harker at the mercy of three vampire brides (Bellucci, Bercu and Kendrick), Dracula makes for his new home in London where he seduces Mina's friend Lucy (Frost) and makes her a vampire. Along with Dr. Van Helsing (Hopkins), Lucy's three suitors, Dr. Seward (Grant), Texan Quincey P. Morris (Campbell) and gentleman Arthur Holmwood (Elwes) set out to destroy Dracula, even as he romances Mina in the guise of a handsome and young foreign prince.



The monster that breathing men would kill. Dracula (Gary Oldman) in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992).



The luckiest man on this Earth is the one who finds true love. Dracula (Gary Oldman) and Mina (Winona Ryder) are joined in *Bram Stoker's Dracula*.

COMMENTARY: Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897) spoke meaningfully and with tremendous resonance to the anxieties and advances of its day, the Victorian Era. It was an age of relative prosperity in England due to colonial imports from Europe and Asia, plus new industry and technology developed at home, from Kodak cameras, to phonographs and early motion-picture devices called cinematographs. In more ways than one, it was a virtual *Pax Britannica*.

Yet some citizens who lived during this span felt a powerful tug between the "modern" and mechanical "dehumanization" of Victoria's reign and the Gothic, romantic, superstitious and traditional past. This single age (1837–1901) gave Londoners the miracle of surgery ... *and* Jack the Ripper; it gave them Darwin *and* Dracula; hypnosis *and* vampires. It was a fascinating time.

Stoker's novel involved Count Dracula, a man literally "Un-Dead," a blood-drinking vampire whose ways were blatantly not England's ways. In the course of the story, this foreigner mounted a one man but multi-front invasion on the Empire. In the form of wind, fog, thunder, rats, owls, bats, wolves, foxes, and other beasts, Dracula laid siege to London's desirable youth (symbolizing the city's future), personally

represented by the much-courted Lucy Westenra. Even his arrival in England aboard the doomed schooner, *The Demeter*, represented a beachhead of sorts, a vanguard of the foreign invasion.

In Stoker's novel, Dracula, who originated in "one of the wildest and least known" portions of Europe (Transylvania), represented the exotic. His home in the Carpathian was a place of superstition, a realm described by Stoker as an "imaginative whirlpool." An evolved Englishman, Jonathan Harker, then encountered Dracula, a throwback to supernatural tradition and direct descendent of conquerors such as Attila the Hun, on St. George's Day, a day during which "all the evil things in the world have full sway."

An epistolary novel—meaning that the action is arranged throughout in letters and communiqués (Harker's journal, letters from Mina, Dr. Seward's diary, Lucy Westenra's Diary, clippings from *The Daily Graph* and *The Pall Mall Gazette*)—Stoker's work pitted the new and rational against the old and the irrational to see which would win. Those fighting Dracula availed themselves of the latest technology and scientific developments, including hypnosis, to battle the shape-shifting vampire.

In the end, though the supernatural put up a tremendous and fearsome battle, reason and rationality won. Even though science could not adequately explain Dracula, its champions ultimately defeated him. The book is definitively not a draw, but there is an acknowledgment that science still doesn't have all the answers. Yet.

Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 film adaptation of Stoker's novel arrives at a time not entirely unlike that era depicted in the original novel. At the dawn of the 1990s, America was on the verge of a two similar prosperity booms: in the realms of globalism and technology, respectively.

On the former front, NAFTA was on the horizon, freeing up barriers to trade on the American continent; on the latter front, the dawn of the Internet had come and the home video camera had been popularized to an extent never before imagined. In terms of motion-pictures, Hollywood found itself on the verge of a huge paradigm shift : moving from practical special effects to computer-generated and digital ones.

Yet even on the verge of cultural and technological progress, conservative, traditional voices were also pushing back and looking to return America to the presumed golden age of the 1950s. In 1996, the answer to Clinton-Gore's "progressive" approach was Bob Dole, a Greatest Generation politician, seemingly a creature from an earlier age.

One possible way to update the Dracula legend for the 1990s would have involved the translation of Stoker's story directly to the 1990s (and likely to America to boot). In the present of the nineties, the film's heroes could use up-to-date technology to defeat the evil count, the vampire from the past. This approach would have preserved the "spirit" of Stoker's work in terms of the conflict between the new and the old, the modern and the antiquated, for contemporary audiences, even while changing the essential character of the story.

But Coppola selected another path, and a highly-intriguing one at that. Specifically, he eschewed modernity almost altogether and filmed his adaptation using, for the most part, technology that would have already been available when Stoker's book was published.

Most of the film's special effects were produced in-camera, not crafted after the fact in post-production. Miniatures were utilized rather than digital representations of vistas, as were double-exposures (film exposed twice to layer one image upon another) and matte boxes. Crank times were varied manually, time-lapse photography using something called an intervalometer was employed, sequences were projected in reverse, and other 19th century technique of forced perspectives were also put to use. Transitions in the film involved iris in/iris out, another technique from the opening chapter of film history.

Again, this is an intriguing approach to the novel, but it does not in any way translate the experience of Stoker's novel accurately. Instead of expressing the idea of up-to-date inventions and new science battling an age-old villain, a viewer in the 1990s is asked to visually countenance the "old," the antiquated instead in relation to the young heroes. This is not a small matter: the form Coppola has selected for his film does not echo the theme of Stoker's book, not unless one is watching it in 1905.

This is in no way a slight of Coppola's execution of historical film techniques, only a note that the format of *Dracula* actually runs counter to the meaning and context of Stoker's novel. It is a battle, in the film, between historical technology (as modern audiences read such devices) and a supernatural, historical evil. A certain dynamic is lost.

Bram Stoker's Dracula is also sold as just that, *Bram Stoker's*, meaning that it is supposedly the most faithful adaptation of Stoker's work ever created. But just as Coppola's selected form fails to mirror the content of Stoker's literary work, so does the screenplay fail to accurately mirror Stoker's landmark novel in terms of plot details.

Specifically, Francis Ford Coppola's film reshapes the tale of *Dracula* into the form of a love story. On screen, Mina is not merely Mina—the heroine of Stoker's book—but also Elizabeta, actually a reincarnation of Dracula's long lost love from his youth four hundred years earlier. She is thus the realization of Dracula's desire to be reunited with his long-lost love. And more than that, she represents his redemption. Once a Christian warrior (in the film's prologue), Dracula turned his back on Christ and God when Elizabeta was taken from him through the deceit of his enemy (Muslims). But Dracula cursed God for the loss, as the film depicts, and became an unholy, eternal abomination.

Again, there's no debating that this approach is intriguing. But in no way is this the shape or form of Stoker's novel. Certainly, Mina of the novel is a "pearl among women," but she is not a reincarnated, Eastern-European princess. She is aware of Dracula in the novel only from the descriptions of others. Furthermore, Dracula boasts no love, reverence or special affection for Mina. Upon making the young woman drink blood from his breast, Dracula explains, in detail, how she shall be used and manipulated. She will be a "bountiful wine-press" for a span and later his "companion and helper," one who shall "cross land or sea" to do his bidding.

In other words, the movie makes up from whole cloth the idea that Dracula has crossed "rivers of time" to find his lost beloved. This superimposition of the love story upon Stoker's story changes its nature quite dramatically. Dracula is no longer merely a conquering invader in the film, an ethnic, incomprehensible "other," but a man with whom audiences can strongly sympathize. He turned evil for a reason. Even his evil acts in London are predicated upon his desire to be reunited with his heart's desire. In the book, Dracula is simply an unsympathetic conqueror, termed "The Evil One."

Where Coppola's film proves most faithful to Stoker's literary predecessor is in the opening passages of his film, which find Jonathan Harker (Keanu Reeves) traveling to Dracula's castle, riding through the mountains on a dark coach and even seeing rings of blue flames on the road. In the early, portentous moments set in Dracula's lonely castle (where there are no mirrors, no servants and no sounds but the howling of wolves in the distance), Coppola gets exactly right the visualization of the old count. He has a "loftydomed forehead," a "cruel-looking" mouth, "long nails" and skin color of "extraordinary pallor." This describes to perfection Gary Oldman's look as the sinister old vampire.

Coppola's film also faithfully portrays other moments from this section of the tale, translating accurately the image of Dracula

crawling down the exterior wall of the castle, and Harker's encounter with his three brides. In all these early moments, Dracula's creeping shadow seems to take on a life of its own, and the claustrophobic, dark atmosphere of fear mirrors well the book's concept that Harker feels he is going mad and becoming increasingly unhinged in his isolation. Out of his peripheral vision, the world seems to have turned to evil and menace.

But again, there's a caveat. Another element undercuts the success of these scenes; it is the very actor Coppola selected for the part of Englishman Harker, a callow, very California-sounding, pre-*Matrix* Keanu Reeves. Without heaping on the scorn, it's fair to say that the actor is simply out of his depth attempting an English accent and carriage.

Yet Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* does a terrific job expressing the journey of the Russian schooner *Demeter*, en route from Varna, and Dracula's progressive destruction of the crew. The film is also one of the few *Dracula* adaptations to feature all three of Lucy's suitors: Seward, Harker and Quincey Morris. The director likewise captures the book's obsession with technology, focusing his camera on "ridiculous" contraptions like the typewriter and the depiction of the wonder of the civilized world, a cinematograph playing *Hamlet*. There's even a shot of a teletype and a view peering down through a microscope. But once more, as viewers, we read these as "antiques," not as cutting-edge tools in vampire hunting.

What may be more generally of interest in this discussion, however, is what seems absent from the film. Dazzling in visual presentation, Coppola's film fails to make evident the atmosphere of constraint, confinement and repression typical of the Victorian Age, especially as it applies to the female characters, Mina and Lucy.

In the film, these liberated gals chatter over the Kama Sutra and sexual positions, and Lucy absolutely revels in her flirtations with her three suitors, not to mention sexual innuendo. Mina even goes on a drug-trip, in a sense, experiencing (with Dracula as her guide) "the little green fairy that lives in the absinthe."

A more accurate portrayal of this historical age, perhaps, would have played down the modern interpretation of women, to a very significant degree. In Stoker's work, Dracula represents the foreign, the exotic, the strange ... the romantic. It's his job to represent those qualities and bring them out in Lucy, to corrupt her. But in this movie Lucy could hardly be more open. Perhaps, unlike the film techniques, this is where Coppola actually decided to modernize the text for contemporary audiences— by making a thoroughly modern Mina.

Another change involves Van Helsing. In the book he is steadfast, deliberate and thoughtful. Hopkins doesn't take the part seriously; he acts like he's slumming it. Hopkins plays Van Helsing big and brash, unbalanced, eccentric, and if truth be told, a little bit bonkers. At one point, the character seems to bi-locate to prove a philosophical point.

Winona Ryder registers strongly as Mina, but the actress is forced to bridge the nearly untraversable gap between the novel's presentation of the character and the screenplay's. For instance, Mina goes from beating and hitting Dracula over Lucy's death to saying, in the very next breath, she wants to be with him forever. She is horrified by Dracula and yet asks him to take her away from "all this death," when she has seen explicitly that the upshot of Dracula's behavior (at least regards to Lucy) is indeed ... demise.

Gary Oldman remains the actor in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* who shines brightest, however. His character is a barbarian at first, a recluse later, and then a young prince renewed not just with youth, but purpose: the reclamation of his lost love. Oldman exudes menace, and as the center of the story, also holds our sympathy. Again, that's not Stoker's Dracula, but it's the task the screenplay gives Oldman. In terms of history, Oldman features the magnetic personal qualities audiences associate with Bela Lugosi, plus the regal, dignified quality of Christopher Lee.

A movie is not a book, and a movie *cannot* be a book, but *Bram Stoker's Dracula* was sold and marketed on the terms that it is the novelist's vision made manifest on film. This is patently untrue, and on those grounds, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* fails dramatically.

Taken outside those terms, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* is a gorgeous, beautifully-presented, individual horror film and a fascinating interpretation of a frequently-adapted story. Both Stoker's novel and Coppola's film explicitly reference Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This is to remind audiences that there are more things in Heaven and Earth, than is dreamed of in our philosophy (and science).

But any mention of *Hamlet* also explicitly reminds viewers that even Shakespeare's words are not sacrosanct, especially in the medium of movies. There have been versions that cut out entire scenes, that put emphasis on certain qualities and that shift the story's essence. Mel Gibson's *Hamlet* is less diffident and more action-leaning, for instance, than many. *Dracula* is a similar animal, a tale adapted over and over in film, in vastly different ways. The bottom line is that Coppola's film is a lush, visually-inventive interpretation of the famous vampire story, even if the visual aplomb and technique are not frequently a good match for either the particulars of Stoker's words, or

his worldview.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer * * .

Critical Reception

"One of the big promises of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is the mix of comedy and action, and on both levels it doesn't deliver. While Pike utters one-liners under his breath, à la James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*, they rarely reach the point of actually being amusing. Then there is Paul Reubens as Amilyn.... His infamous, exceptionally long death scene is handled poorly and it only comes across as embarrassing. In case you thought I forgot the action, don't worry, so did the director. The scenes of battle in this film are so inadequately choreographed and edited, you never really know what's going on. These scenes also lack any semblance of tension that could've given them an edge."—

Andrew Hershberger. *Cinescape*. November 23, 2001, http://www.mania.com/buffy-vampire-slayer_article_30934.html

"In the middle 60s this would have been a beach-blanket comedy. The direction of Fran Rubel Kuzui (*Tokyo Pop*) suggests that she's more comfortable with character than action, and Joss Whedon's script has some fun with Valley talk (both genuine and ersatz) but strains to sell the story. Paul Reubens (the former Pee-wee Herman) and Rutger Hauer camp it up as vampires...."—Jonathan Rosenbaum, *The Chicago Reader*, <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/buffy-the-vampire-slayer/Film?oid=1052648>

"It's understandable that Joss Whedon would all but disown this film for being such a bastardization of his original vision, but if we can temporarily distance ourselves from the One True Buffy that came along a few years later, this is one engaging, suspenseful, very funny and sporadically even poignant film. Sharp writing is one reason why it succeeds in spite of itself, given that the whole valley girl schtick was, like, soooo over by 1992, but the cast—leads and supporting players alike—really make it fly. Scores of young actresses can pull off the hot young ditz, but Kristy Swanson brings some depth and a convincing physicality to the title role. Donald Sutherland gives one of his most measured and well-realized performances in those last days

before he decided to take up scenery-chewing as a full-time gig, and Stephen Root serves notice that he's destined to become one of the most beloved character actors of his generation. Seasoned genre fans will sadly attest that horror comedies seldom work the way they're supposed to, but this one undeniably does."—John Bowen, author, *Rue Morgue*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kristy Swanson (Buffy); Luke Perry (Pike); Rutger Hauer (Lothos); Donald Sutherland (Merrick); Paul Reubens (Amilyn); Michelle Abrams (Jennifer); Hilary Swank (Kimberly); Paris Vaughan (Nicole); David Arquette (Bennie); Natasha Wagner (Cassandra); Candy Clark (Buffy's Mom); Sasha Jenson (Grueller); Stephen Root (Murray).

CREW: 20th Century–Fox Presents a Karzui Enterprises/Sand Dollar Production. *Casting:* Johanna Ray. *Costume Designer:* Marie France. *Music:* Carter Burwell. *Film Editors:* Camillio Toniolo, Jill Savitt. *Production Designer:* Lawrence Miller. *Director of Photography:* James Hayman. *Film Editor:* Sandy Gallin, Carol Baum, Fran Rubel Kuzui. *Written by:* Joss Whedon. *Produced by:* Kaz Kazui, F. Howard Rosenman. *Directed by:* Fran Rubel Kazui. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A watcher named Merrick (Sutherland) informs superficial Californian cheerleader Buffy (Swanson) that she is actually the "Chosen One," the slayer born to destroy vampires. Merrick attempts to train Buffy to fight an age old creature of the night, Lothos (Hauer), but she resists the call to battle in hopes of being just another normal girl ... who wants to shop. As her teenage friends transformed into vampires, Buffy romances Pike (Perry) and finally fights Lothos ... at the senior dance.

COMMENTARY: The story of Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is pretty amazing. It's the story of how a promising but not-so-great movie became one of the greatest horror TV series of all time. It's the story of how the slasher paradigm's most famous character archetype, the final girl, finally grew up; how Laurie Strode and Nancy Thompson evolved into the irrepressible and heroic Buffy Summers: a fully three-dimensional woman who could not only look after herself, but could beat the monsters ... to a pulp.

But every great story experiences growing pains. And the movie version of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* really suffers from them. The

screenplay is cleverly written by wordsmith Whedon, and Kristy Swanson undeniably pours her heart into the lead role of Buffy, but director Fran Rubel Kazui's execution of the film leaves much to be desired.

The clichéd presentation of the vampires here is just dreadful. Rutger Hauer plays the role of Lothos with his tongue in cheek, but even so is undercut, in terms of appearance, by the white-pancake make-up and the stereotypical black-and-red cape he wears. It's a creaky visual for a film that should be cutting edge.

The flashbacks to the "Dark Age" in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* also reek of sound-stages, giving the film a made-for-tv feel. A more inventive director would have shown less, either by making the sequences darker or avoiding long shots.

Some moments in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* tread so far into comedy that the film's overarching sense of reality nearly buckles under the strain. For example, Pike's friend Bennie (Arquette) floats outside a second story window at night, and Pike doesn't act alarmed or even surprised by the nocturnal visit. I know he's supposed to be sleepy and all, but it's like Pike forgot he lives on the second floor and that his best buddy doesn't ... float. This isn't funny; it's stupid. It sacrifices character intelligence for a moment that isn't that funny.

Similarly, during the prom set-piece, the high school principal hands out detentions slips to a gang of twitching, mugging teenage vampires. Not only are the actors playing the vamps here absolutely dreadful, but it's unbelievable that any reasonable human being would deal with them in this fashion. It's important in horror that when imperiled, characters react appropriately. The principal's silly actions undercut the threat of the vampires; it turns them into a joke. That's okay for a comedy but not a horror film.

These comedic overreaches are disappointing simply because *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is funny enough without them. Joss Whedon has created an entire world here, connecting the "Dark Ages" of history to what the film humorously terms "the Lite Ages" in 1990s Los Angeles. This is a world of affluence, Valley Girls, and utter inconsequence. During the film, Buffy overcomes her environs, overcomes her adolescent self-involvement, and learns to look at the larger picture. Thanks to the influence of a mentor (Sutherland's Merrick), she gains a deeper understanding of herself and the world around her. Suddenly, the mall doesn't hold the appeal it once did.

A metaphor for growing up, a critique of conformity in high school, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* clearly boasts tremendous potential.

What's also wonderful about Joss Whedon's world is how he gifts his characters with his signature brand of Slayer Speak or Buffy slang. This form of speaking is simultaneously condescending and mean, and yet naïve; simultaneously smart and yet utterly vapid. It's a singular thing, and, miraculously, improved upon for the TV series too. But in the film, characters say things like "God, what's your damage?" Or while dismissing fashion: "that's so five minutes ago." This seems to say something about 1990s teen culture: it's smart, but not smart about the right things. All the intelligence is wasted on a tabloid, vapid, Hollywood culture.

Again, there's a valid thematic point to this funny material. It isn't just snappy to be snappy. It's an acknowledgment that the teens of Buffy's world live in a bubble of irrelevancy, right down to the forms of communication. The vampires, symbolizing the responsibilities of adulthood, puncture that bubble.

The 1990s was the era of the "Dawn of the Woman" in genre films and television. Women were showcased as capable heroes on TV programming as diverse as *The X-Files*, *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001), *Charmed* (1998–2007), and *Black Scorpion* (1999). And in the horror film, the nineties gave audiences two more encounters with Sigourney Weaver's Ripley in *Alien³* and *Alien Resurrection*, plus Agent Starling (Jodie Foster) in *Silence of the Lambs*. It was the era of third-wave feminism, or in the vernacular of the pop group The Spice Girls: "Girl Power."

This admirable trend is clear in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which depicts Buffy as a girl who can stand up for herself, yet who still wants to feel connected to her world and friends. "You're not like other girls," Pike notes (correctly). But, feeling vulnerable, Buffy replies, "Yes, I am."

She can be the Chosen One *and* want a handsome boy to kiss her. She can rescue the world, *and* still want to wear a dress. That's what true liberation is or was fashioned as in the American 1990s.

Had it been executed in less obvious, less trite fashion, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* would have been a horror comedy in a class with *Fright Night* (1985), *Return of the Living Dead* (1985) or the recent *Zombieland* (2009). Instead, the film only reveals flashes of inspiration. Pike describes Buffy as "Queen of the Cardboard Jungle" and that's a perfect way of describing this film. Buffy is a Queen, all right, and the movie—silly vampires and all—has a cardboard, hackneyed feel to it. But Buffy would soon rise again on television and correct all of the flaws featured in this film. Long live the Queen.

And adios and farewell to the cardboard jungle. You're so five

minutes ago.

Candyman * * * *

Critical Reception

"Serious, straightforward cinematic terror is hard to come by these days, but this literate shocker is the scariest film since *The Silence of the Lambs*, and joins *Bram Stoker's Dracula* as one of the best supernatural movies in years."— *TV Guide*, [http: // movies.tvguide.com/candyman/review/128918](http://movies.tvguide.com/candyman/review/128918)

"Played by Tony Todd (and his velvety basso profundo voice), the Candyman is a svelte, sexual monument, far removed from the silent brutality of your average serial slasher. Rose's dizzy, *Jungle Fever*-ish romanticism is juxtaposed against his cold, Cronenbergian dystopia to create *Candyman's* uniquely baroque use of modern urban blight, subtle political undercurrents, and hints of fallen woman melodrama. It creates a startlingly effective shocker that gains power upon further, sleepless-night reflection."—Eric Henderson, *Slant Magazine*, August 3, 2004, [http: //www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/candyman/1102](http://www.slantmagazine.com/film/review/candyman/1102)

"It was nice to have a new movie boogeyman introduced and Tony Todd's presence sells the film as well as anything. It's an exploitation film that doesn't feel like an exploitation film, with genuine attempts at characterization. It would lose its strength in its sequels, following the typical Hollywood formula of watering down the mysterious by explaining things. A slick, polished, interesting to watch horror film."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Virginia Madsen (Helen Lyle); Tony Todd (Candyman); Xander Berkeley (Trevor Lyle); Kasi Lemmons (Bernadette Walsh); Vanessa Williams (Anne-Marie McCoy); Dejuan Guy (Jake); Marianna Elliott (Clare); Ted Raimi (Billy); Ria Pavia (Monica); Carolyn Lowery (Stacey).

CREW: Tri-Star Pictures presents in association with Polygram

Films Entertainment, a Propaganda Films Production, a Bernard Rose film. *Castings*: Jason La Padura. *Film Editor*: Dan Rae. *Production Designer*: Jane Ann Stewart. *Director of Photography*: Anthony B. Richmond. *Music*: Philip Glass. *Based on "The Forbidden"* by: Clive Barker. *Executive Producer*: Clive Barker. *Produced by*: Steve Golin, Sigujon Sighavatson, Alan Poul. *Written and directed by*: Bernard Rose. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A graduate student, Helen Lyle (Madsen), working on a thesis about urban legends investigates a mythical local boogeyman called "Candyman" in the public housing complex in Chicago called Cabrini-Green. To summon Candyman (Tony Todd), one need but look in a mirror and recite his name five times in a row. To Helen's horror, what she believes is only a local myth is actually real, and she develops a close—too close—acquaintance with Candyman. Before long, she is being blamed for his bloody crimes: murders committed by hook.

P.O.V.: "Candyman isn't real. He's just a story, you know, like Dracula or Frankenstein."—Helen Lyle (Virginia Madsen) has it all wrong in 1992's *Candyman*.

COMMENTARY: The visually alluring and highly sensual *Candyman* puts the "urban" back in the term urban legend. Bernard Rose's stellar film also benefits enormously from its unique central location: a public-housing development in Chicago, the presence of one of the cinema's most regal boogeymen, Tony Todd's Candyman, and a thematic grounding in one of the hotly-debated issues of the 1990s, race in America. The film is an "exploration of the genesis, dissemination, and interpretation of myth, as it circulates across differing boundaries of class, race and gender in Chicago ... it links a supernatural tale to the horrors of a racist past and the poverty and urban segregation of many African Americans today."²⁵

A loose adaptation of Clive Barker's "The Forbidden" (from *Books of Blood*), *Candyman* concerns in large part the history of African Americans in the United States. In 1890, Candyman, or Daniel Robitaille, was the educated son of a slave. He was welcomed in polite society as a talented artist, a painter. But when he fell in love and impregnated the subject of one portrait, the virginal daughter of a white aristocrat, he was punished brutally for stepping outside society's ordained boundaries. His right hand was sawed off with a rusty blade. Then he was smeared with honey and was stung to death by bees.

What *Candyman's* origin represents is the nation's history of

racism and cruelty to those of color, to be sure, and the Southern fear of miscegenation, the mixing of the races. Slasher films often concern the transgression or crime in the past, and white society's shattering of moral laws to kill Candyman fits the bill here and sets the stage for his eventual resurrection.

In the present, *Candyman* also depicts visually the effect of forbidding miscegenation, of segregating races, on an entire population. On Chicago's north side, poor blacks live in squalor in Cabrini-Green, an urban center which at its pinnacle housed some 15,000 people. Although the development was meant to forge a kind of "urban renewal," white flight from Cabrini-Green in the 1970s left it a predominantly black neighborhood, one stained by vandalism, gang warfare, cockroach infestations, chain-link fences and terrible violence. A twelve-year-old was killed in Cabrini-Green in 1992 while walking to school and holding his mother's hand, in an incident that horrified the nation. In 1997, Cabrini-Green was the site of an infamous rape.

A separate culture unto itself, *one where police officers are afraid to go*, Cabrini-Green in *Candyman* develops its own specific mythology and mythological figures that fit the need of its already-terrorized population. As the legend goes, Candyman's ashes were spread across Cabrini-Green. Now his spirit haunts this world of graffiti, urban desolation and blight, the home of his descendents.

Candyman is thus a warning to black children not to misbehave. It is an urban legend about what happens to black men who step out of "their place" in American society. In some ways, Candyman is also a method by which to blame real life violence and bloodshed on a larger-than-life mythical figure, rather than focus on issues of responsibility and accountability inside the selfsame community.



Urban legend come to life, Candyman (Tony Todd) abducts Helen Lyle (Virginia Madsen) in *Candyman* (1992).

To Caucasians, the legend of Candyman represents an overwhelming, if perhaps subconscious, fear of black culture and the way that the specter of slavery still "haunts" parts of the country, even a hundred years after the practice was abolished. And again, this was an important issue in the 1990s. Although President Clinton rejected the idea of reparations for the descendents of slaves, he suggested in 1997 that a national apology was in order to get over the ghosts of the past, so America could truly become a "multi-racial" democracy.

Candyman is the ghost of an unjust past, resurrected as a "rumor" in the present, "a story" given flesh by those who believe in him. It is in this way living in "other people's dreams" that Candyman exists ... and kills. What Candyman represents is a way for the closed, shunned culture in Cabrini-Green, the so-called "wrong part of town," to deal with the past and to deal with the unpleasantness of modern life. In this fashion, the movie is really about the power of ideas and the power of belief. Candyman is a bogeyman like Freddy, but he exists not in the world of nightmares, but in the fervent belief of his followers. He refers to them as "his flock" and wants more believers, more people to be his victims" and "believe in" him.

The 1990s are certainly the most self-reflexive, post-modern era of horror films and *Candyman* fits this trend. Fictional books (*Basic Instinct*, *In the Mouth of Madness*), fictional characters (*The Dark Half*),

fictional screenplays (*Wes Craven's New Nightmare*) and fictional movies (*Popcorn*) poured over into consensus reality in the horror films of the 1990s. Here, an urban legend does the same thing, becoming real because people believe in Candyman's story. Candyman thus describes himself as the writing (the graffiti?) "on the wall" and "the whisper in the classroom."

Appropriately then, *Candyman* begins with the recitation of the urban legend, about reciting Candyman's name five times in a mirror (and this mode of incantation actually comes from the urban legend about a character called Bloody Mary). We are then informed that this modern campfire or bedtime story reflects modern oral folklore and is a reflection of our urban society.

From there, we follow Helen's investigation into Candyman's legend, and as she grows to believe in it, she is framed for Candyman's murders. In one scene, she seems to literally cross over before our eyes. She crawls through a connecting tunnel between Cabrini-Green apartments and emerges in a strange room marked by graffiti. Surrounding the corridor aperture is the artistic representation of a screaming black man. Helen is literally crawling out of his mouth. She represents, in some way, his voice, his next avenue of "being." As Judith Halberstam wrote in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*:

... this startling image hints at the various forms of oral transmissions that the film circulates. Is Helen contained by the oral history of the Candyman or is she the articulate voice of the academy that disrupts its transmission and brings violence to the surface?²⁶

I would argue that Helen believes she's the latter, but the truth is the former: she is part of the legend, herself, she just didn't know it.

These murder scenes in *Candyman* are splendidly, egregiously gory, with the topper being the excessive sequence in which Candyman guts Helen's therapist. Another harrowing scene involves a grimy public bathroom where a toilet brims with Candyman's bees. It's disgusting.

Like all supernatural villains, *Candyman* has a weakness. That weakness is that his victims must believe in him. His seduction of Helen is not only sexual, reflecting the seduction that killed Candyman in the first place back in the 1890s, it is something else too. He seduces her into believing in him, so he can continue to exist in the flesh. In the end, all she has left is "her desire for him," and that

desire isn't physical; it's the human desire to believe in something supernatural, to believe in something impossible. But *Candyman* needs not just belief from Helen, he requires her death, too, so that her belief will be transmitted to others. "Your death will be a tale to frighten children," he reports, and the cycle continues.

Candyman is gorgeously shot and at times even downright hypnotic, a carefully-crafted reflection of Candyman's silken, beckoning cadence, and his very impact on Helen. The film also gives the horror genre one of its greatest boogeymen. But more than that, it contextualizes the reasons why a culture (white culture or black culture) would even create a boogeyman out of Danielle Robitaille and his cruel fate. He is white guilt personified; and he is a warning to blacks, or perhaps even a symbol of black rebellion.

The film's foreboding setting, a dilapidated, ruined public housing complex that has been ignored or forgotten by white society at large makes for some authentic discomfort too. Some of the early shots, aerial pushes towards Cabrini-Green, powerfully convey the idea of a geographically isolated community in the heart of a modern metropolis. The film's violence—with Candyman cutting people from "gullet to groin" is extreme and unforgettable and just what audiences seek in a powerful horror film.

In general, the 1990s had a difficult time crafting boogeymen on a par with those of earlier decades (Michael Myers, Freddy, Jason, Pinhead and Chucky), but Tony Todd's Candyman ascends to that rarified circle by highlighting a distinctive mythology, a charismatic presence, a memorable weapon (hook), a brutal death to be avenged (by bees, no less), a specific rubber-reality domain in which to dwell (modern folklore and the land of belief), and a subtextual identity that says something about America and the context of the pop culture in the 1990s.

Dr. Giggles * * *

Critical Reception

"Who would have thought that a formula horror film about a deranged M.D.'s son with an outlandish penchant for vengeance could be such a hoot? Manny Coto ... has cobbled together an endless stream of two-bit medical gags and splatter film conventions and come up with a low-rent quickie that's so over-

the-top it's impossible not to like."—Marc Savlov, *The Austin Chronicle*, October 30, 1992, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Calendar/Film?Film=oid%3A139360>

Cast and Crew

CAST: Larry Drake (Dr. Giggles); Holly Marie Combs (Jennifer Campbell); Glenn Quinn (Max Anderson); Cliff De Young (Mr. Campbell); Richard Bradford (Officer Magruder); Nancy Fish (Elaine Henderson); Michelle Johnson (Tamara); Keith Diamond (Officer Joe Reitz); John Vickery (Dr. Chamblertlin); Doug E. Doug (Trotter); Denise Barnes (Leigh); Sara Melson (Coreen); Zoe Trilling (Normi); Darin Heames (Stu). Patrick Cronin (Sheriff Harper). **CREW:** Largo Entertainment Presents in Association with JVC Entertainment, a Dark Horse Production of a Manny Coto film. *Casting:* Karen Rea. *Executive Producer:* Jack Rae. *Co-Producer:* Mike Richardson. *Music:* Brian May. *Production Design:* Bill Malley. *Film Editor:* Debra Neil. *Director of Photography:* Robert Draper. *Written by:* Manny Coto, Graeme Whifler. *Produced by:* Stuart M. Besser. *Directed by:* Manny Coto. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A psychotic killer nicknamed Dr. Giggles (Drake) escapes from a mental hospital and returns to his family home in Moorehigh, the town where his father—the local doctor—saw his reputation and life destroyed because of a descent into madness. A vengeful Dr. Giggles begins a killing spree in town, removing the hearts of his victims, but soon determines to save a local girl, Jen (Combs), who suffers from a heart problem just like his dead mother did. Dr. Giggles attempts to abduct Jen for emergency heart surgery. Meanwhile, her boyfriend Max (Quinn) and a heroic cop, Reitz (Diamond), attempt to locate the mad physician.

COMMENTARY: If John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) had been played for laughs, the results might look a lot like Manny Coto's outrageous guilty pleasure, *Dr. Giggles*. Both movies dramatize the adventures of a murderous escaped mental patient on the night he "comes home" to kill. But where *Halloween* is admirably minimal, intensely suspenseful and downright terrifying, *Dr. Giggles* is exuberantly over-the-top, irredeemably silly and delighted with its own heightened, exaggerated sense of lunacy. In essence, the film is a long string of gory murder set-pieces punctuated by absolutely ridiculous doctor jokes.

That's all, folks.



The Doctor is out ... of his mind. Dr. Giggles (Larry Drake) returns home in Manny Coto's *Dr. Giggles* (1992).

Yet on that admittedly limited basis, the film succeeds. *Dr. Giggles* undeniably aims low, but as a consequence it effortlessly hits all its low hanging fruit. By the time the film reaches its silly conclusion, a shattering of the fourth wall in which the wounded titular psychopath looks to the audience and asks "is there a doctor in the house?" the movie has you precisely where it wants you.

Giggling.

The film deliberately resuscitates the conventions of the popular late 1970s–1980s slasher movie paradigm and gives them new, droll life. It uses as its organizing principle the milieu of physicians and hospitals. This means that the final girl is a "patient" in need of heart surgery, that the brutal killer is a "doctor" and that his weapons are

surgical instruments and other doctor's tools, like a blood pressure pump. It also means that his ultimate purpose is medical, a kind of Hippocratic Oath in reverse: the taking of hearts and lives rather than the preservation of them. The *de rigueur* tributes or homage to past productions involve doctors too, and in one scene, *Ben Casey* (1961–1966) plays on television by point of bedside manner contrast.



If you think this is bad, wait until you get his bill. Dr. Giggles (Drake) performs surgery on Jennifer (Holly Marie Combs) in *Dr. Giggles*.

But it's the jokes that make the medicine go down. After murdering one victim, Giggles scoffs "If you think that's bad, wait until you get my bill." After wrapping another victim in a giant Band-Aid (in the film's lamest kill), he quips, "Don't worry, it's ouchless," echoing a popular Band-Aid commercial of the 1990s era. In toto, who knew there were so many doctor clichés hanging around out there? Yet *Dr. Giggles* mines virtually every one and serves them up with tongue-in-cheek gusto. The film is a relentless joke factory.

A useful point of comparison here is *Leprechaun*, another movie featuring a silly, quipping slasher movie-style menace. Yet that movie was a boring runaround, an endless chase back-and-forth across a dusty front yard while doopey characters screamed incessantly and fought back. The *Leprechaun*'s jokes were lame, and the film's tone was inconsistent. *Dr. Giggles* not only co-opts the slasher paradigm for consistent comedic effect, it features some innovative set-pieces as

well, including my favorite, the stomach pump.

Dr. Giggles even exhibits a wicked way of visualizing things. For instance, one shot finds the camera perched *inside a character's mouth*, looking down across her tongue and teeth as the villainous Dr. Giggles inserts a tongue depressor. It's not deep, but it's ingenious.



His direction is ouchless. Manny Coto takes the helm of Largo's *Dr. Giggles* (1992).

Larry Drake seems to be having the time of his life here and his central performance is pitched perfectly for the material. And the likeable if endlessly serious Holly Marie Combs also grounds the film with her portrayal of the young woman in jeopardy.

The 1980s gave us approximately a millionand-one slasher movies, all tailored to a dogmatic, specific, rerun formula, and many evidencing a kind of mind-numbing, flat approach. *Dr. Giggles* isn't high art, but at the very least it evokes smiles and momentarily rejuvenates that moribund formula.

Indeed, this was the film's devoted mission. "I would love, if after seeing the movie," suggested film director Manny Coto, "that anyone who ever goes to a doctor will break into laughter or get squeamish because they remember a scene from *Dr. Giggles*." ²⁷

Sometimes laughter *is* the best medicine, especially for a genre in some distress and suffering a turn-of-the-century identity crisis. This is just what the doctor ordered.

Dolly Dearest * * (DTV)

Cast and Crew

CAST: Denise Crosby (Marilyn Wade); Sam Bottoms (Elliot Wade); Chris Demetral (Jimmy Wade); Candy Hutson (Jessica Wade); Lupe Ontirveros (Camilla); Will Gotay (Estrella); Alma Martinez (Alva); Enrique Renaldo (Luis); Rip Torn (Karl Resnick); Rene Victor (Nun at Convent); Luis Cortez (Peter); Jamie Gomez (Hector); Ed Gale (Dolly Double).

CREW: Patriot Pictures Presents in association with Chameleon Enterprises, a Maria Lease film. *Casting:* Billy Da Mota. *Music:* Mark Snow. *Production Designer:* W. Brooke Wheeler. *Film Editor:* Geoffrey Rowland. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* Alan G. Markowitz. *Director of Photography:* Eric D. Anderson. *Executive Producer:* Pierre David. *Story by:* Maria Lease, Rod Nave, Peter Sutcliffe. *Written by:* Maria Lease. *Produced by:* Daniel Cady. *Directed by:* Maria Lease. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The Wade family relocates to Mexico to open a "dolly dearest" doll factory on the cheap. Once there, however, Elliot (Bottoms) finds the factory in disrepair and worse, constructed next to an old Mayan, subterranean tomb. Little Jessica (Hutson) soon comes into possession of a "Dolly" inhabited by the spirit of an ancient force, not a Mayan ... but actually a "Sanzia." The Sanzia, according to archaeologist Karl Resnick (Torn), attempted to create a Devil Child using child bones and an animal skull and were largely successful. Now Marilyn (Crosby) must save her little girl from an evil influence, even though no one believes her story of an ambulatory doll.

COMMENTARY: In *Horror Films of the 1980s*, I wrote about a particular class of horror films fitting the paradigm I called "Innocents Abroad." In a nutshell, it involves upper class white Americans visiting foreign countries and exploiting the local economies only to come in contact with evil ethnic spirits who punish them for cultural transgression.

In the process of exterminating the evil, I wrote, "Americans invariably receive a lesson" not just in alternate religions, but also in hubris. It's Mark Twain by way of Wes Craven, I suggested. Some examples of the form are: *Daughters of Satan* (1971), *Beyond Evil* (1980) and *The House Where Evil Dwells* (1982).

Dolly Dearest is an "Innocents Abroad" horror film with a distinctive 1990s twist. As a representative of the format, it features an American family living in another country, in Mexico this time. And the Americans are there, naturally, to make money: to open a doll factory exploiting the cheap labor in Mexico. *Dolly Dearest* then pits said family, the Wades, in combat against a local ethnic spirit, the demonic "Sanzia."

Also, in typical "Innocents Abroad" fashion, the imperiled upper class (white) family ignores the warnings of a knowledgeable, spiritual local, their maid Camilla, and pays the price for their arrogance: their daughter is nearly possessed by the evil spirit. In the end, the American family is victorious, but its plan to get rich quick on the backs of the locals is as dead as the defeated evil force: the factory has been utterly destroyed. That giant sucking sound they hear is their future prosperity.

The 1990s twist on the "Innocents Abroad" format is the idea of a small American business relocating to Mexico and profiting there from lower taxes and lower wages. This was a hot-button issue of the decade. Diplomatic negotiations on NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) commenced in 1991 when President Bush, Mexican President Carlos Salinas and Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney met for a summit in San Antonio, Texas. This triumvirate of leaders then departed for their respective countries and legislatures after a ceremonial signing agreement. The treaty was ratified in 1994, under President Bill Clinton.

The goal of NAFTA was to eliminate barriers of trade and investment between the U.S., Mexico and Canada but some forces in American labor objected, claiming NAFTA would be bad for American workers, who enjoyed a higher standard of living than those in Mexico (where workers stood to benefit as poverty rates fell and real income rose).

Other critics, such as Noam Chomsky, argued that NAFTA was simply a corporate hand-out, permitting U.S. businesses to flee to a more profitable environment. Ross Perot, a presidential candidate in 1992, also complained that American jobs would be lost across the border.

All this is but background context in *Dolly Dearest*, which showcases what occurs when Americans, unaware of local customs, attempt to make a killing in a land where the rules are different. The Wade family doesn't respect the local customs, doesn't listen to those in the know, namely Camilla, and is faced with the prospect of mass producing not just an inferior product, but one which could kill you!

In the end, they blow up their own factory with dynamite and flee back to the States, having learned that there is no such thing as a "free lunch," essentially.

Where Americans put our faith in "machines," say the locals, they respect custom and tradition, and the Sanzia may even symbolize a kind of "local pride" which refuses to be co-opted for someone else's bottom line. So yeah, look for the Sanzia label...

A cautionary tale about American hubris, *Dolly Dearest* is nonetheless only a middling horror film. The evil dolls (and there are many of them here) are certainly creepy, but the film strains believability at times. For instance, the Wades have just moved to a remote, desert-like area in Mexico. Yet the parents don't keep an eye on their young children, and the kids are constantly seen leaving the family home at night, unsupervised. And, let's also recall, the home is near a tomb and accident site! Kind of a dangerous playground, wouldn't you say? The children also don't attend school, or spend time with a tutor.

Mark Snow's score works overtime to invest interest in *Dolly Dearest* and make it seem more suspenseful than it actually is, and Denise Crosby is always an effective heroine, but despite the 1990s context, this movie really isn't the same class, genre-wise, as the best Chucky movies. *Dolly Dearest* never seems that frightening, and some of the death scenes border on comical, particularly a heart attack in which a fast-beating heart seems to pulsate outside the rib cage on a victim's chest.

Dust Devil * * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Robert Burke (Dust Devil); Chelsea Ward (Helen); Zakes Mokae (Sgt. Ben Mukarob); Rufus Swarti (Mark Robinson); William Hootkins (Captain Beyman); Marianne Sagebrecht (Dr. Leidzinger); John Mashikiza (Joe Nimand); Russell Copley (Dutoit); Terrir Norton (Saarke).

CREW: Shadow Theater Films presents a Palace Production of a Richard Stanley film. *Special Make-up and Animatronic Effects:* The Dream Machine. *Production Designer:* Joseph Bennett. *Costume Designer:* Derek Trigg. *Music:* Simon Boswell. *Director of Photography:*

Simon Boswell. *Executive Producers*: Bob and Harvey Weinstein. *Produced by*: Joanne Sellar. *Written and directed by*: Richard Stanley. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 108 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In South Africa, A woman named Wendy (Ward) leaves her husband Mark (Swarti) for a trip to the west. In the drought-ridden town of Bethany, she encounters a murdering spirit of the human form, a nomadic demon called the Dust Devil (Burke). She teams with a local detective, Ben (Mokae), to attempt to stop the monster.

COMMENTARY: Richard Stanley's *Dust Devil* is a remarkable improvement over the director's first feature film, *Hardware* (1990), which captured perfectly the shape and vibe of cyberpunk but at the expense of humanity, and occasionally watchability.

By contrast, *Dust Devil* is an impressive achievement: a lyrical, epic horror film that not only captures local color in South Africa, but artfully explores the mysteries and magical realities some societies associate with the enigmatic realm of the desert.

Stanley's mother spent much of her career exploring the local legends of South Africa, writing them down and compiling the tales from this oral tradition. *Dust Devil* arises, in part, out of that interest, and is also based on Stanley's dreams from adolescence of a wandering nomad in the desert after the apocalypse has come (the image that opens *Hardware*, incidentally). The Dust Devil of the film's title is not just an evil, shape-shifting spirit, but Stanley's evolution of the "Man with No Name" character from the spaghetti western format, which the director admires.

Many of the powerful images in *Dust Devil* involve the ghost figure wandering a ghost town, Bethany, now in its seventh year of drought. The evil spirit can "smell a town waiting to die," and there's the feeling that he inhabits these backwater places because he can operate in secret, without examination or interference. A pervasive red hue dominates the film color's palette, and the dialogue suggests that the "Earth is drying up, cracking," on its deathbed, and that the dust devil is itself a vulture feeding on the planet's carcass.

Stanley is incredibly skilled crafting memorable images, even if his storyline seems somewhat abstract, and *Dust Devil* is downright gorgeous, visually-speaking. After the Dust Devil kills a woman he has slept with, for instance, the inscrutable demon stands in front of a mounted animal head on a front porch. For a moment, the long horns of that stuffed trophy look like they are his horns and the fleeting image tells us what we need to know about the spirit. When the

demon burns the house down, a voice on the radio discusses a pervasive evil in the land, one perhaps responsible for drying the Earth up. Clearly, we are meant to connect the image to the soundtrack, and understand what we are witnessing here.

One shot in particular associates the demon with a vulture: they are depicting side-by-side atop a craggy mountain. Comparing notes, perhaps, looking over the carrion. "He preys upon the Damned, the weak, the faithless. He sucks them dry," the movie informs us of this stranger, this vanishing hitchhiker wandering the lonely roads of the wasteland.

Dust Devil's message seems to be that the Earth is dying, morality is dying, and civilization is dying too. In a world disordered and dreary, such creatures as the Dust Devil thrive. Near the film's climax there are several miraculous-seeming views of a city buried in sand as the wasteland reclaims civilization for itself. This is where the final battle plays out and where the Dust Devil changes his form to something new (the only part of the film that audiences may see coming). But this finale, set in the city half-buried in dust, speaks of a creeping end of the world, one that won't be recognized until it is too late.

A fin de siècle-styled film, *Dust Devil* also involves the allure of evil, since Burke's villain scores sexually with more than one female in the film. He's a demon, it's important to note, but also a man ... and women seem drawn to him.

Finally, Stanley has a knack here for making brutal violence feel personal. When the likable detective played by the incomparable Zakes Mokae is gutted by his opponent, Stanley shoots the violent act in opposing close-ups, with some accompanying blood spatter, so that the audience feels the *emotion* of the moment. He encourages the audience to register the pain of the characters, rather than to recoil at the gruesome, or gawk at the violence. Instead, Stanley leaves the gawking for the Dust Devil's demise, a spectacular coup-de-grâce involving decapitation by shotgun blast.

Dust Devil is loaded with weird, abstract imagery (like a watch that runs backward), and taken altogether, the images seem to signal doom and gloom. Whatever its meaning, *Dust Devil* is one of the most intriguing and elegiac horror films of the 1990s. It's a masterpiece of mood and imagery, even if the specifics of the story are occasionally as barren as the desert that features so prominently in the action.

(a.k.a. *The Gate II: The Trespassers*) *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Louis Tripp (Terry Chandler); Simon Reynolds (Moe); James Villemaire (John); Pamela Segall (Liz); Neil Munro (Art); Larry O'Bey (Rep E 1); Elva May Hoover (Doctor); Irene Pauzer (Teacher); Mark Saunders (Waiter); Edward Leefe (Bus Boy); Andrew Ladanyi (Minion).

CREW: Vision PDG Presents an Alliance Entertainment and Damon/Saunders Production. *Casting:* John Buchan. *Production Designer:* William Beeton. *Director of Photography:* Bryan England. *Music:* George Blondheim. *Special Effects Makeup:* Craig Reardon. *Special Visual Effects:* Randall William Cook. *Executive Producer:* John Kemeny. *Produced by:* Andras Hamori. *Written by:* Michael Nankin. *Directed by:* Tibor Takacs. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Young demonologist Terry Chandler (Tripp) hopes to relive the greatest night of his life—the night of the demons—by summoning up further minions of darkness. The rite goes wrong, however, when local bullies interfere in the ritual and shoot one of the demon minions. With the help of Liz (Segall), Terry takes care of the demon and extracts his most precious desire from it: that his alcoholic Dad should get his job back at the airline that fired him. But there are repercussions to every wish, and this one is no different...

COMMENTARY: The original *The Gate* (1987) was a good movie that commented on an important trend of its day: how latch-key children were being left at home by parents to their own devices in the late 1980s. Though the vast majority of these kids wouldn't do anything wrong or dangerous on their own, there were some who would get into trouble, and even experiment with demonology...

The Gate II is a disappointing sequel that only brings back one cast member from the original film, and it isn't Stephen Dorff. Furthermore, *The Gate II* takes the franchise in a drippy, treacly, down-in-the-mouth direction. This time, glum, lonely Terry (Tripp again) revives more demons, and uses one to fix his imperfect life as well as his imperfect father.

Along the way, two dopey bullies, John (Villemaire) and Moe (Reynolds), make a minion-spawned wish too (to be rich), and, in

short order, it literally goes to shit. When the demonic dream fails you see, it turns into piles of stinky, pooppy grue.

Not entirely unlike this cut-rate sequel.

Budgetary limitations hamper *The Gate II* almost as much as the underwhelming script does. The movie features basically one little minion demon, metaphorically the "roadie" of the demon world, and then sees the little tyke kicked around and abused for the duration of the picture, hardly a fearsome villain or worthy antagonist.

The three human "wishers" become demons themselves, the price for their unearthly gifts, and at the last minute Terry remembers his humanity in time for a special effects light-show. By then, it's a case of too little too late.

The movie ends with the demonic gate closed, and all the annoying characters, Terry, Moe and Johnny, crawling happily out of their coffins, alive and well. Like the rest of the movie, that valedictory moment feels empty and devoid of tension. Nothing about this movie works, and the sequel is a real comedown from the original, a tremendous disappointment.

Ghoulies 3: Ghoulies Go to College . (DTV)

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kevin McCarthy (Professor Ragnar); Evan Mackenzie (Skip Carter); Erin La Rue (Erin Riddle); Patrick Labyorteaux (Mookie); John Johnston (Jeremy Heilman); Billy Morrisette (Wes); Stephen Lee (Barcus); Marcia Wallace (Miss Boggs); Jason-Scott Lee (Kyle); Sherie Willis (Buffy); Griffin O'Neal (Blane); Thomas Adco-Hernandez (Pixel); Andrew Baruch (Harley); Patrick Michael Ryan (Bud).

CREW: Lightning Pictures presents an Iain Paterson film, a John Carl Buechler Production. *Casting:* Michael Cutter. *Ghoulies Make-up:* John Carl Buechler, Magical Media Industries. *Music:* Michael Lloyd, Reg Powell. *Film Editor:* Aidan Bernard. *Production Designer:* Stephen Greenberg. *Director of Photography:* Ronn Schmidt. *Produced by:* Iain Patterson. *Written by:* Brent Olsen. *Directed by:* John Carl Buechler. *MPAA Rating:* R.

SYNOPSIS: It's Prank Week at Glazier College, and the competition between Skip Carter's (Mackenzie) fraternity Beta Zeta Theta and

Jeremy Heilman's (Johnston) Gamma Gamma Gamma is fierce. Humanities professor and Dean of Students Ragnar (McCarthy) gets his hands on a comic called *Ghoulies Tales* and conjures three dim-witted Ghoulies using a rite within the work. His plan is to use the Ghoulies to create the biggest frat war ever and in the process, get them thrown off the campus. But Skip has other plans. He's going to win back his girl from Jeremy, win the prank crown, and defeat the ghoulies.

COMMENTARY: I guess aiming high wasn't an option here. A film that expanded the world of *Ghoulies*, introduced believable human characters, and actually attempted to scare audiences would have just been too hard to make, huh?

Instead, *Ghoulies 3* plays like an imbecilic, horror-themed version of *Animal House* (1979) or *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984). It follows the activities of three diminutive rubbery monsters that fart, belch and booze it up throughout, also pulling pranks like raiding panties, and peeping on comely co-eds in the shower. The three monsters quip a lot ("What a dump!" "Honey I'm home!" and, most dramatically, "I'm sporting half-achubby") but essentially represent the third fraternity on campus. The male college students (with names like Mookie and Skippy) are about as intelligent and cultured as the ghoulies, making stupid jokes, leering at girls, and not worrying about things like class or their future. After all, there's a prank crown to win back, people!!!!

The great Kevin McCarthy really slums it here, playing the film's main villain, a professor who is seduced by the evil and power of a comic book into conjuring rubbery ghoulies. It's an inauspicious appearance for the star of *Invasion of the Body of Snatchers*, and he plays his first scene wearing that prank crown and a big ghoulie face on his tummy.

I like a good horror comedy as much as the next fellow, but there's never a moment of real humor in this film. It's just ... crickets-ville. The movie opens with a slapstick sequence that culminates with a janitor getting hit in the nuts and a man getting his face crammed into ice cream. Before long, Ghoulies are popping out of smoky toilets, and a goofy security guard (who wears women's panties) is riding around in a cart named Bonnie that he protects and covets. If this sounds like the making of a great comedy, by all means have at it.

Near the climax of *Ghoulies 3*, Jeremy Heilman (who is repeatedly compared to Hitler in the film, right down to jokes about goose-stepping) attempts to plant a stink bomb in Skip Carter's fraternity room.

Unfortunately, the stink bomb that explodes on the audience is

this movie.

***The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Rebecca De Mornay (Peyton Flanders); Annabella Sciorra (Claire Bartel); Julianne Moore (Marlene Craven); Ernie Hudson (Solomon); Matt McCoy (Michael); John De Lancie (Dr. Mott); Kevin Skousen (Marty); Madeline Zima (Emma); Justin Zavek (Schoolyard Bully); Eric, Jennifer, Ashley Melander (Baby Joe).

CREW: Hollywood Pictures Presents an Interscope Communications film in association with Nomura, Babcock and Brown, a Curtis Hanson film. *Casting:* Junie Lowry-Johnson. *Music:* Graeme Revell. *Co-Produced by:* Ira Habershtadt. *Film Editor:* John F. Link. *Production Designer:* Edward Pisoni. *Director of Photography:* Robert Elswit. *Executive Producers:* Ted Field, Rick Jaffa, Robert W. Cort. *Written by:* Amanda Silver. *Produced by:* David Madden. *Directed by:* Curtis Hanson. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 110 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Expecting her second child, suburbanite Claire Bartel (Sciorra) is molested by her ob-gyn, Dr. Mott (De Lancie), and when the scandal is exposed, he commits suicide. Mott's wife, Peyton (De Mornay), collapses and has a miscarriage over the incident. Six months later, Peyton masquerades as the Bartel family nanny and begins a campaign of terror and subversion against Claire.

COMMENTARY: *The Guardian* (1990) was just the beginning. The financially successful *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, which made some eighty-seven million dollars at the American box office, dramatizes much the same story only without the supernatural angle. Here, a beautiful but villainous nanny, an interloper of the highest order, gets a foothold inside the American suburban home and threatens the mother-child relationship.

"You never let an attractive woman take a power position in your house," a character, Marlene (Moore), advises Claire Bartel in *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, and the movie plays out the ramifications of Bartel's failure to heed that good advice. As I wrote in regards to *The Guardian*, the fact of the matter is that with two-income households in the 1990s, homemaking (and parenthood itself) was

being increasingly outsourced to strangers by a large segment of the population. The change was so pervasive that public schools across the country were dropping home economics programs as part of their core curriculum. Work in the home was to be the province of a new underclass in America.

Accordingly, in *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, Claire must regain the role she gave away: Mom. Her final revenge sees Peyton—the interloper—impaled on a symbol of American traditional values restored: a white picket fence. Suburbia is safe.

Before that end, however, Peyton makes a remarkable amount of mischief in the Bartel home. She exposes the little Bartel girl Emma (Zima) to horror movies (no!) and gets the kindly family gardener, an African American simpleton named Ernie, framed on false charges of molestation.

But Peyton's most egregious act, her most terrible act of boundary-breaking, occurs with little baby Joey. She breast feeds him herself, thus causing the baby to prefer her milk over Claire's. It's a terribly devious act, but also a representation of "truth" in some sense. Peyton has become the boy's mother in every real sense, so it's natural that she would attempt to nurse him and that he would accept the entreaty. Indeed, Claire evidences shock when her child doesn't seem to prefer her anymore, even though she has totally abdicated her role as Mom with him.

As was the case in *The Guardian*, the nanny here proves utterly adept at manipulation, especially when it involves the husband and his sex life. Peyton sets up Michael so it appears that he has been unfaithful to Claire with her best friend and his first love, Marlene. Claire makes a scene at her own birthday party, thereby presenting the appearance of being a woman out of control. Just what Peyton wants.

Peyton's insatiable rage occurs in the film because of the death of her husband and death of her own, unborn child, but also at the fact that the American dream has been taken away from her. She must now work as a domestic to bring in income. Elayne Rapping, a professor of communications, wrote of De Mornay's interloper in this fashion:

But Peyton—racist, manipulative, greedy, pathological—now that's a woman who has lived through the 1980s and has been transformed by them. Her ugliness is the ugliness of the Reagan-Bush era with its nasty way of pitting us all against each other—especially the poor, women, minorities—as we scramble for the

few crumbs left after the lucky top dogs finish their gargantuan meal of imported delicacies.²⁸

On that front, early on in the film, a black man, Ernie (Solomon), pops up at a window for a jolt, and it's a purely racist gambit: an evil black man at the window! Oh no! But it too is a representation of the terrible fear borne out at the ballot box in 1994 that white culture is losing its privileges and dominance to new conventions and outside forces. Peyton need only drop a clue or two to turn to her liberal, white, affluent masters against the African American servant who has faithfully and loyally served their needs.

Another threat to white bliss comes from the health care world. Peyton's husband, Dr. Mott, molests Claire after entering a scene with the immortal line "let's start with the breast exam." Everyone, it seems, is taking advantages with the American family in the 1990s. Nannies, blacks, and medical professionals. This makes the movie feel reactionary, but it's impossible to deny that it accurately captures the vibe of the early part of the decade. Michael, the dad here, incidentally, is "a genetic engineer" by trade. This too is a sort of joke. He can't even manage his house, how is he going to "engineer" a better future when his home is so out of control?

Punctuated by *The Omen* (1976)-style death scenes, such as Moore's demise in a glass greenhouse, *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* captures a real sense of American anxiety as the middle class tries to keep up with unwanted change and progress.

At 110 minutes, the film is overlong, but Peyton is one of the most memorable interlopers in film history, nursing a baby that isn't hers, emptying Mom's asthma inhaler, and otherwise wreaking total havoc. Like *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991), the film also finds malevolence in classical music, and in austere, modern architecture.

I would maintain that *The Guardian* is a deeper, better-made film concerning an evil nanny, but audiences voted by and large for *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, a more naturalistic but also more pedestrian and predictable variation on the story.

***Hellraiser 3: Hell on Earth* * * .**

Critical Reception

"The beginning of the end for the *Hellraiser* franchise. In transforming Pinhead from a dark avenger to an indiscriminate movie slasher, much of the specialness that Clive Barker imbued in the original material is lost. The new Cenobites are trite and laughable as well. A tremendous letdown after the superb *Hellbound*."— Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Terry Farrell (Joey Summerskill); Doug Bradley (Pinhead); Paula Marshall (Terri); Kevin Bernhardt (J.P. Monroe); Ashley Laurence (Kirsty Cotton); Ken Carpenter (Doc/Camerahead); Bent Bolthouse (CD the DJ); Peter Atkins (Rick the Barman); Lawrence Kuppin (Derelict); Peter Boynton (Joey's Father); Clayton Hill (Priest).

CREW: Clive Barker presents an Anthony Hickox Film, a Fifth Avenue Entertainment, a Lawrence Mortorff Production. *Special Effects Coordinator:* Bob Keen. *Music:* Randy Miller. *Supervising Film Editor:* Christopher Cibelli. *Film Editor:* James D.R. Hickox. *Production Design:* Steve Hardie. *Director of Photography:* Gerry Lively. *Story:* Peter Atkins, Tony Randel. *Based on Characters Created by:* Clive Barker. *Written by:* Peter Atkins. *Executive Producer:* Cliver Barker. *Produced by:* Lawrence Mortorff. *Directed by:* Anthony Hickox. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

INCANTATION: "I was dying to do it. It was kind of exciting to be attached to Clive Barker and the whole mythology."—Director Hickox discusses *Hellraiser III: Hell on Earth*²⁹

SYNOPSIS: Aspiring news reporter Joey Summerskill (Farrell) discovers a strange story while on her beat at the hospital emergency room. She learns that a strange box and pillar—direct from the Channard Institute—has been purchased by a corrupt local club owner, J.P. Monroe (Bernhardt). The immoral Monroe is soon dragging victims back to the pillar to resurrect Pinhead (Bradley), the Cenobite. After Joey ends up in possession of the box, Pinhead raises a gaggle of new Cenobite minions to get it back, but Joey has an unexpected ally: Pinhead's "human" side.

COMMENTARY: On the first page of his treatise *Recovering the Self: Morality and Social Theory*, philosopher Victor Seidler wrote that "in the 1990s, there has evolved a sense of moral crisis and unease about the breakdown of traditional forms of authority."³⁰

To put it another way, right and wrong were not so easily

understandable in the "everything is relative," "it depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is" era of the 1990s.

As early as 1992, Seidler's "traditional forms of authority" were seen to be failing in America, at least by some.

Directed by Anthony Hickox, *Hellraiser III: Hell on Earth* is constructed on this growing sense of unease over society's moral flailing and failings. "There is no good, there is no evil, Monroe," the demonic Pinhead informs his quarry at one point in the film. "There is only flesh. And the patterns to which we submit it." Characters in the Hickox film are also encouraged to "take pleasure in" the material world: in their bodies; in their belongings; in their vanity; in their hedonism, even. This is a response, simply put, to the Reagan, yuppie 1980s.

Tellingly, this particular material world is one that focuses on rampant images of death and destruction. Monroe's club, "The Boiler Room," is a paean to death and violence. Dancers are seen trapped in cages, wearing leather suits and boasting pierced body parts. It's a culture of death, and the lyrics of one heavy metal ballad tell of a "hanging judge" and inform listeners that they "are the Devil." Effigies of babies are displayed in the club, their mouths wired shut. A pro-life statement, or just a fashion statement?



Joey (Terry Farrell) gets her hands on the prize, the

Lament Configuration, in *Hellraiser III: Hell on Earth* (1992).

Even Joey, the film's protagonist, is associated with death. Her last name is Summerskill, and she self-destructively smokes like a chimney. Her dreams, her very subconscious, are haunted by images of death, of the bloody Vietnam War. Joey's father died in that war so Joey, in a very real sense, is a child of that war, of the turbulent 1960s that did so much to radicalize both sides of the growing American divide, right and left, red and blue.

When traditional authority fades, what's left, it seems, is society turned inward on itself, "Appetite sated," and "desire indulged" in the words of Pinhead. It's a spiral of self-satisfaction and a fracturing of the larger community. The character of Terri, well-played by Paula Marshall, is an example of this. She is a lost soul, willing to accept an abusive relationship with Monroe just so she can feel loved. By someone. Anyone.

The supporting characters who become Cenobites in this film are not evil by any traditional or conventional definition. Rather, they are simply *not* good. They put their desire, their ambition first. Doc, a camera operator, becomes a Cenobite and wisecracks, "ready for your closeup," playing on his job as a news cameraman in recording the "suffering" of others. Another Cenobite is the DJ who plays the death-metal, exposing audiences to a constant diet of nihilism. A bartender in the Boiler Room becomes a Cenobite as well, one who belches fire and mixes explosive drinks. His evil act? Contributing the chemical of liquor to an equation of moral uncertainty and self-degradation.

Traditional forms of authority are so debunked, so debased in *Hell on Earth*, that a Catholic priest denies the very tenants of his Church. He tells Joey that "Demons aren't real. They're parables, metaphors." Even the Church itself doesn't believe in the Devil and thus, by extension ... God, undeniably the most "traditional" form of authority in human history.

Interestingly, even Pinhead himself obeys no authority save his own personal compass in this film. This is the only *Hellraiser* film in which this is so, in which Pinhead is unbound from Hell (and the Lord of the Labyrinth, Leviathan). Even he has rejected his traditional authority: Hell itself. He notes "I am the Way," mocks Christ and performs a mock communion, joking "This is my body, this is my blood."

Again, it's important to note that in previous films, Pinhead was like a Hellish scientist, going about his Leviathan-appointed tasks with some degree of intelligence and restraint. He wasn't a mad slasher or sadist, he was after an appointed target (such as Frank Cotton), and

would make deals with certain mortals (like Kirsty) to acquire those targets. He also spared Tiffany because he realized she was an innocent, in *Hellbound* (1988), because "hands don't call us. Desire does."

Hell on Earth is intriguing for all these narrative touches and u-turns in *Hellraiser* mythology. Yet it fails to impress in the arena of continuity with the franchise, where some matters should seem consistent, not different. For instance, how is an independent, loose-cannon- style Pinhead able to transform human beings into Cenobites at all, without the appropriate mechanisms of Hell? *Hellbound* dramatized the Cenobite-creation process in detail, in relation to Dr. Channard's transformation. That film revealed a kind of Cenobite-making chamber in which victims were locked inside. Then weird, demonic worms went to work on the enshrined soul, removing all the blood and filling the body with an unearthly blue fluid. Shorn of such devices, how can Pinhead make living human beings into monsters? Does he carry a portable Cenobite-making kit with him, just for occasions such as this?

Secondly, in this film, the Lament Configuration (the puzzle box) is used as a kind of particle-beam weapon, zapping Cenobites back to Hell. But these Cenobites didn't arise from Hell ... so why would it send them "back" to Hell?

It's also undeniable that the Cenobites created in *Hell on Earth* are second-tier monsters, nowhere near as disturbing or as effective as Chatterer or Butterball, Pinhead's old peeps. I mean, a Cenobite who hurls razor-sharp compact discs? A cenobite who belches fiery drinks? One with a camera lens for an eye? These guys just feel pretty lame in concept and execution. Not to mention the fact that they are easily dispatched by Joey.

Hell on Earth fails for another reason. *Hellraiser* (1987) and *Hellbound* (1988) really plumbed the depths of human depravity and obsession. Barker's original film featured brutal, uncompromising imagery. Julia wanted Frank to have skin so she could have sex with him and therefore bludgeoned lovers with a hammer so he could devour that flesh and get it.

And remember the goopy Julia, returned from the dead in *Hellbound*, caressing Channard? It was clear he wanted her ... skin or no skin. There was a commitment in those *Hellraiser* films to genuinely disturbing imagery and content. By contrast, *Hell on Earth* plays like a run-of-themill thrill ride, without featuring anything to truly trouble the slumber. It represents a mainstreaming of a spiky franchise.

This mainstreaming is evident in the removal of Pinhead's

support network (the Cenobites, Leviathan, etc.) and his ascension, or perhaps devolution to Freddy-like, quipping boogeyman. It's evident in the switch in leads too—from the clever, interesting Kirsty, to the drop-dead gorgeous and more acceptably American-seeming Farrell. And it's evident in the toning down of the imagery and the power of that imagery.

Still, *Hellraiser III* is probably better than the films that would follow it in the franchise later in the 1990s.

To quote Pinhead again: "Down the dark decades of your pain, this will seem like a memory of Heaven."

Highway to Hell * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Chad Lowe (Charlie); Kristy Swanson (Rachel); Richard Farnsworth (Sam); Patrick Bergin (Beezle); Adam Storke (Royce); Pamela Gidley (Clara); Jarrett Lennon (Adam); C.J. Graham (Sgt. Bedlam/Hellcop); Anna Meara (Medea); Jerry Stiller (Desk Cop); Ben Stiller (Pluto's Cook/ Attila the Hun); Amy Stiller (Cleopatra); Gilbert Gottfried (Adolf Hitler); Kevin Peter Hall (Charon); Randy Widner (Ice Cream Man).

CREW: John Daly and Derek Gibson present a Hemdale Film Corporation, Goodman-Rosen/ Josa High Street Pictures Production. *Co-Producers:* Brian Helgeland, Daniel Rogosin. *Casting:* Diane Dimeo. *Production Designer:* Phillip Dean Foreman. *Film Editors:* Todd Ramsay, Randay Thornton. *Director of Photography:* Robin Vid geon. *Music:* Hidden Faces. *Written by:* Brian Helgeland. *Produced by:* Mary Ann Page, John Byers. *Directed by:* Ate De Jong. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young couple, Charlie (Lowe) and Rachel (Swanson), steal away from home one dark night, planning to elope to Las Vegas. However, a wrong turn lands them on a dark stretch of abandoned road. There, Rachel is abducted by the evil "Hellcop," Sgt. Bedlam (Graham), and taken to Hell ... where the virgin is to become the newest bride of the Devil (Bergin). Charlie meets up with an old man, Sam (Farnsworth), who runs the Last Chance Service Station on the lip of the highway to hell, and who prepares him for a journey to Hell City. Charlie enters Hell to rescue Rachel, and along the way survives an odyssey that takes him to Pluto's Diner, Jimmy Hoffa's casino, and even the river Styx. But the Devil, disguised as a mechanic named Beezle, is watching him...

COMMENTARY: On first look, *Highway to Hell* appears to be just another silly, almost scattershot horror-comedy from the early 1990s, the era of *Basket Case 2*, *Army of Darkness*, *Prom Night 3: The Last Kiss* and *Sundown: The Vampire in Retreat*. But on closer examination this road-bound horror features strong, likeable characters and a clever overlay of mythological elements, especially those involving the nature of the underworld.

In short, *Highway to Hell* is an updated Orphic myth. In Greek mythology, Orpheus, the world's greatest poet and musician, set about to rescue his beloved wife, Eurydice, from the Greek equivalent of Hell—the underworld or Hades—after she had been killed by a snake bite. The hero's descent into the underworld is a common theme throughout human history and literature and is also featured in Japanese, Sumerian and even Mayan mythology.

Highway to Hell is another 1990s variation on this age old tale, with Charlie Sykes (Chad Lowe) driving the highway of Hell itself to reach Hell City and rescue his beloved Rachel (Kristy Swanson) from the Devil (Patrick Bergin). When he finally rescues her, he is given one condition for her release: "Don't Look Back." And indeed, that warning comes right out of Orpheus's journey. He is unable to obey, and loses Eurydice in the underworld forever. Charlie is luckier.

Along his journey, Charlie must also battle creatures and situations right out of many other underworld myths. For instance, in order to cross the river Styx, he must evade the three-headed dog Cerberus, and Cerberus is known in Roman mythology as the dog who guards the gates to Hades. In *Highway to Hell*, Charlie's helpful dog, Ben, pisses in Cerberus's territory, thus giving Charlie the distraction he needs to pass.

The film also utilizes Christian-based mythology about the underworld. Over the river tunnel to Hell City is a billboard LED that reads "Abandon all hope, Ye who enter here." Of course, this warning is a famous line from Dante's *Inferno*, the first movement of his epic *Divine Comedy*, which concerned the poet's tour of the nine levels of Hell.

One of the funniest scenes in the film involves "The Good Intentions Paving Company," referencing the old truism that "the road to Hell is paved with good intentions." This line was believed to have originated with St. Bernard of Clairvaux, but *Highway to Hell* makes it literal. Before Charlie's eyes, a construction company grinds out doomed souls—literally paving the highway—who had good intentions. "I was only sleeping with my husband's boss to advance his career," one woman explains before being ground into pavement. She is ushered to her fate by none other than Andy Warhol. The whole work crew is made up of Andy Warhol lookalikes, having their fifteen minutes of fame in Hell.



Hellcop (C.J. Graham) patrols the back roads of the Underworld in *Highway to Hell* (1992).



She's not his type. Charlie Sykes (Chad Lowe) battles a demon during his Orphic journey in *Highway to Hell*.

Highway to Hell is brimming with inventive gags like these (including commercials for Styx Beer and a bumper sticker that reads "Pontius is my co-pilot.") It makes up with wit what the production clearly lacks in dollars. Another funny, almost throwaway sequence involves a dinner table with reservation cards for Kaddafi, Imelda Marcos, and ... Jerry Lewis. Over a PA, the following announcement is heard: "Paging Idi Amin. To the white courtesy phone, please...."

But *Highway to Hell* never lets the gags overwhelm the horror and that distinguishes it in large part from many horror-comedies of the 1990s. Instead, Hellcop is a fearsome sentinel, and the movie culminates with a tense race between Charlie and this boogeymen. Everything is on the line here. Charlie can take Rachel and a boy named Adam home if he can outrace the Hellcop, and it's surprising how dramatic and suspenseful this gambit proves.

Highway to Hell even showcases a darker, ambiguously voiced subplot regarding that child, Adam. He is Satan's ward and throughout the film, Satan insists he has big plans for the boy: that Adam's disposition is "not a game" and that he is different from "Attila," and "Adolf." This adopted child is what then? The Anti-Christ? And by bringing him back to Earth, are Rachel and Charlie doing the Devil's work? Have they been duped by the Prince of Lies, and was this his gambit all along, to see the enigmatic Adam transported back to Earth from Hell? This seems possible, given a careful reading of the film.

What remains so interesting about the Devil/Adam dynamic is that there is also another character in Hell named Royce, played by Adam Storke. He was once a child exactly where Adam is, as the Devil's preferred ward, but then the Devil decided to forsake him and concentrate on Adam. In short, then, Lucifer has recreated in Hell the very dynamic which saw him vanquished from Heaven. He has become "God" here, shunning his "favorite" child and casting him off to a life without his presence.

Highway to Hell also features an affecting little subplot about a couple who didn't see a positive outcome for the quest that Charlie now undertakes.

Long, long ago, the beautiful Clara (Gidley) was taken by the Hellcop on Black Canyon Road, leaving her soulmate, Sam (Richard Farnsworth), to mourn her. Now an old man, Sam minds a gas station, "Sam's Last Chance," at the lip of the highway to Hell, hoping to see Clara one last time. In the course of the film, Charlie finds out what has become of her, and it's a bit sad.

A mega-star of the 2000s, Ben Stiller also appears throughout *Highway to Hell* in a variety of small but amusing roles. He's a short order cook in Hell who discusses head cheese, and later he's Genghis Khan to Gilbert Gottfried's Adolf Hitler.

Highway to Hell is not in the class of pulsepounding road thrillers like *Duel* (1972), *The Hitcher* (1986) or even *Breakdown* (1997), but it consistently amuses and is smart and suspenseful. The movie's sense of humor does it credit, and I especially liked one exchange: "Can you tell me the fastest way to Hell?" Charlie asks, desperate to retrieve Rachel from the Hellcop and Satan himself.

The answer?

"Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll..."

CAST: Anne Parillaud (Marie); Robert Loggia (Sal); Chazz Palminteri (Tony); Anthony LaPaglia (Joe Gennarro); Don Rickles (Emmanuel Berg -man); David Proval (Lenny); Luiz Guzman (Morales); Elaine Kagan (Frannie Bergman); Rocco Sisto (Gilly); Leo Burmester (Flinton); Kim Coates (Ray); Angela Bassett (Sinclair); Tony Lip (Frank); Frank Oz (Pathologist); Tony Sirico (Jacko); Marshall Bell (Marsh); Tom Savini (Photographer).

CREW: Warner Bros presents a Lee Rich Production of a Landis/Belzberg Film. *Casting:* Sharon Howard-Field. *Costume Designer:* Deborah Nadoolman. *Executive Producer:* Jonathan Sheinberg. *Special Make-up Effects:* Steve Johnson. *Music:* Ira Newborn. *Film Editor:* Dale Beldin. *Production Designer:* Richard Sawyer. *Director of Photography:* Mac Ahlberg. *Written by:* Michael Wolk. *Produced by:* Lee Rich, Leslie Selzberg. *Directed by:* John Landis. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 112 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Pittsburgh's Little Italy, a grieving vampire named Marie (Parillaud) feeds on a mobster, Tony (Palmenteri), and makes it look like a mob hit by blowing his head off with a shotgun. But before long, Marie has become intertwined with undercover agent Joe (La Paglia) and the notorious mobster Sal the Shark (Loggia). After feeding on Sal, Marie is forced to leave the scene of the crime, and the gangster transforms into a vampire. Before long, Sal has bitten his lawyer, Bergman (Rickles), and his henchmen and is on his way to become King of the Underworld in every possible meaning of that term.

COMMENTARY: Director John Landis attempts to do for vampires in *Innocent Blood* what he did for werewolves in *An American Werewolf in London* (1981). In fact, on an almost note-for-note basis, the director repeats the ingredients that made his eighties film such a hit with critics and audiences alike. Unfortunately, played a second time a decade later, the once-winning formula doesn't seem as audacious, as funny, or nearly as tragic.

The werewolf mythos is tied to the progress of the full moon, and the romantic moon is also renowned as that "great matchmaker in the sky." Accordingly, Landis was able to vet simultaneously in *An American Werewolf in London* a tale of werewolves and of romantic love. It was a tragic romance between brash American tourist David Naughton—a werewolf—and a lovely British nurse played by Jenny Agutter. Used ironically, Landis's soundtrack in *American Werewolf*

featured familiar tunes such as "Bad Moon Rising" and "Blue Moon" so as to chart the progress of the central love relationship as well as Naughton's progressive transformation to beast. The film's considerable humor arose, in part, from the stiffupper-lip-style reaction of the British locals to Naughton's embarrassing and monstrous escapades.

Innocent Blood likewise focuses on an international human/monster couple, this time an Italian-American cop played by Anthony LaPaglia and a French vampire, portrayed by Anne Parillaud. The soundtrack is dotted this time by Frank Sinatra—sung mobster ballads that also double with "monstrous" meaning in this context: titles such as "I've Got You Under My Skin" and "That Old Black Magic." And the humor of *Innocent Blood* arises from the conventions and clichés of the gangster film, recently popularized again in Martin Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990). Here, for instance, Sal the Shark offers his vampire conquest, Marie, some great Italian food with garlic and she promptly demurs.

Unfortunately, this joke, like much of the gangster talk, plays as very cliché and obvious. Beyond that, LaPaglia and Parillaud—who seems to have trouble with her English—share little chemistry. At the film's conclusion, when Marie chooses to walk out into the sunlight and immolate herself (before a last minute change of heart), there's no real pathos because the audience never feels that the main characters truly care for each other. They share a graphic sex scene together, in which Marie's eyes change color like a 1970s mood ring, but beyond that physical entanglement, the romance is referred to but never actually felt or experienced by the audience.

The main characters are gloomy and dull in *Innocent Blood*, but Robert Loggia's villain, Sal the Shark, is full of life. There's a great scene early on in which the Mafioso discusses the merits of toaster ovens versus microwaves to treacherous goons, and then beats a disloyal assistant over the head with the toaster oven.

Later, in the film's best sequence, Sal awakes on the coroner's table at the morgue. The shocked coroner, played by Frank Oz, gives quizzical chase. The path of the chase takes both confused men by a press conference, and the reactions of the reporters are priceless. Loggia also does a growling good job with the film's gangster/vampire dialogue. "I can hear an angel fart," he tells one underling, in all sincerity, after the transformation.

Another neat joke involves the film's cameo appearance. Landis goes out of his way to cut to footage of notorious screen monsters on TV sets. We see Christopher Lee, Bela Lugosi, and Robert Montgomery

as Bruno Anthony from *Strangers on a Train*. Then, as punch line, Landis cuts to Dan Quayle, vice-president of the United States...

Gore lovers may also find much to enjoy here. The scene during which Don Rickles' character—a lawyer—goes rabid with a nurse ends with an impressive and disgusting disintegration, the counterpart, perhaps, to Griffin Dunne's everrotting ghost friend in *An American Werewolf in London*.

Innocent Blood is amiable enough, but ultimately not very exciting or thrilling, in part because the casting just doesn't work. The leads don't seem interested in one another, let alone in love, and so the story—like Loggia's *Sal*—has no beating heart. A simple cast change might have done the trick. Chazz Palminteri has a small part here as a gangster named Tony. He brings more life and energy to his scene with Parillaud than LaPaglia brings to the whole picture. If Palminteri had played Joe, perhaps the romance would have felt more authentic and we wouldn't have been left with the impression that Landis needs not innocent blood here, but new blood to liven up this familiar formula.

Jennifer 8 * * .

Critical Reception

"*Jennifer 8* promises a plot of excruciating complexity, but the storyline turns relentlessly dumb. By the end the characters might as well be wearing name tags: 'Hi! I'm the serial killer!' This is the kind of movie where everybody makes avoidable errors in order for the plot to wend its torturous way to an unsatisfactory conclusion."—Roger Ebert, *The Chicago-Tribune*, November 6, 1992, <http://roger.ew.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19921106/REVIEWS/211060302/1023>

"Robinson does fail one genre rule. He brings the movie in at way over two hours. They should have called this *Jennifer 128*. But he makes sure to duplicate the genre's in-built flaw: Like most thrillers, from *Fatal Attraction* to *Basic Instinct*, the ending can't possibly live up to the expectations it creates. Nowadays we're conditioned to expect—at the very least—a fake ending, a plot twist and a jagged knife gleaming in the light. Yet, when it happens, there's a feeling of utter dissatisfaction, of being had. When all is said and done, somehow it ain't the same movie you

started with. That's the scary part."—Desson Howe, *The Washington Post*, November 6, 1992, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/jennifereightrhowe_a0af2f.htm

Cast and Crew

CAST: Andy Garcia (John Berlin); Uma Thurman (Helena); Lance Henriksen (Ross); Kathy Baker (Marjorie); Kevin Conway (Citrine); John Malkovich (St. Anne); Graham Beckel (John Taylor); Lenny Von Dohler (Blattis); Bob Gunton

(Mr. Goodridge); Paul Bates (Venable); Perry Lang (Travis); Bryan Larkin (Bobby Rose).

CREW: Paramount Pictures Presents a Scott Rudin Production. *Casting:* Billy Hopkins, Suzanne Smith. *Music:* Christopher Young. *Costume Designer:* Judy Ruskin. *Film Editor:* Conrad Buff. *Production Designer:* Richard MacDonald. *Director of Photography:* Conrad L. Hall. *Executive Producer:* Scott Rudin. *Produced by:* Gary Lucchesi, David Wimbury. *Written and Directed by:* Bruce Robison. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 125 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Divorced big city detective John Berlin (Garcia) moves to a small northern California town to work in a police department with his friend, Ross (Henriksen). His first case involves the discovery of a severed human hand in a municipal trash heap. That gruesome clue leads to evidence of a serial killer who may have stalked and murdered seven previous victims; all of them young, blind women. Berlin believes that the next target may be the beautiful, blind Helena (Thurman), but the killer executes a plan to frame Berlin for the murder of his partner.

COMMENTARY: Slow-paced and lugubrious, *Jennifer 8* is also moody and grim. In the film's first scene, set in the pounding rain at a giant garbage dump in "God's Country" (near San Diego), several severed body parts are discovered in the trash. This grim discovery sets the tone for an impressively-mounted but ultimately too-familiar to be very exciting serial killer story.

So much of the *Jennifer 8* narrative comes straight out of the serial killer paradigm without the slightest modification or twist. There's the wrong-headed chief of police, a thankless role played by the always-compelling Kevin Conway. There's the police procedural format, with unlike partners (Henriksen and Garcia) bouncing off each

other. There's also the serial killer who collects newspaper clippings of his activities and who lurks in plain sight. And, of course, there's the beautiful female witness who needs protecting from the strong hero cop. In this scenario, Uma Thurman's Helena is the blind witness, and her condition harks back to *Wait Until Dark* (1967). Of course, lest I forget, there's also a red herring in *Jennifer 8*.

In this case, the red herring provides one of the film's most disturbing and memorable sequences. While the blind Helena is naked in the bath tub, an intruder sneaks in, stands on the toilet just feet away, and begins snapping photographs of her. Helena is soon aware he's there, but there's nothing she can do about it. It's not like she can really identify him. As it turns out, however, this peeper isn't the serial killer cutting up women and leaving them with no heads and no hands. He's just a garden-variety scumball.

The performances here are all good, but top honors go to Lance Henriksen and John Malkovich. Henriksen invests all of his sense with his trademark world-weary persona, a mixture of amusement and exhaustion. Malkovich shows up late in the game as a cynical, hardened Internal Affairs agent, and he is absolutely riveting in his limited screen time. Malkovich makes the most out of a *de rigueur* scene in which the movie's protagonist, played by Garcia, is framed for the murders. "Were you drinking that night?" he asks, inevitably. The lines aren't too strong but Malkovich's interpretation of them is sizzling.

Andy Garcia is the actor who must carry the film, and he plays well the character's increasing sense of rage and helplessness. The only problem is that John Berlin does not come across as very smart. He is clever enough to puzzle out the clues of the case, but not smart enough to keep his calm when dealing with his superiors and other policeman. He creates most of his own problems and that's just convenient for the plot. Thurman, by contrast, is an ethereal ice princess, lovely to look at, but ultimately remote.

The final twist of *Jennifer 8*, that the serial killer is pursuing a different victim than he thinks he is, is likely the only inventive flip here on convention, and it's certainly a high point too. One just wishes the rest of the film felt a bit more urgent, a bit less laid-back. And the serial killer himself is no great revelation or memorable character, either. *Jennifer 8* falls more on the "thriller" side and less on the "horror" side of the genre, but even if it didn't, it's just so mired in the mundane that even a fantastic score from Christopher Young and the evocative, moody cinematography from director of photography Conrad Hall can't carry the day.

At 125 minutes, *Jennifer 8* is too long and too diffuse for the story to achieve much visceral impact. But the images are another matter altogether. From the suffocating darkness and institutional gloom of Jennifer's apartment building, to wintry blizzards that blanket the killer's tracks and bury the past, the palette of *Jennifer 8* is nothing short of extraordinary. And that opening scene, on the hill of detritus and cast-off body parts, is one for the history books, pointing the genre towards *Se7en*, which makes a modern metropolis its refuse pile, and which also gets much mileage from ubiquitous rainfall.

The Lawnmower Man * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"A puzzling film that has absolutely nothing to do with the Stephen King short story it was supposedly 'adapted' from other than a common name. The movie does explore the then-new concept of virtual reality in an interesting way, but even that can hold little wonder in our own thoroughly digitized age."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jeff Fahey (Jobe Smith); Pierce Brosnan (Larry Angelo); Jenny Wright (Marnie Burke); Mark Bringleson (Sebastian Timms); Geoffrey Lewis (Terry McKeen); Jeremy Slate (Father Mc-Keen); Dean Norris (Director); Colleen Coffey (Caroline Angelo); Troy Evans (Lt. Goodwin); Rosalee Mayeux (Carla Parkette); Austin O'Brien (Peter Parkette); Ray Lykins (Harold Parkette); Jim Landis (Ed Waits); Mike Valverde (Day Gate Guard); Doug Hutchison (Security Tech); Duane Byrne (Letchworth Buddy).

CREW: New Line Cinema Presents an Alive Vision production in association with Fuji Eight, Co., Ltd., a Brett Leonard Film. *Casting:* Sally Denison, Patrick Rush. *Costume Designer:* Mary Jane Fort. *Production Designer:* Alex McDowell. *Film Editor:* Alan Baumgarten. *Music:* Dan Wyman. *Director of Photography:* Russell Carpenter. *Executive Producers:* Edward Simons, Steve Lane, Clive Turner, Robert Pringle. *Written by:* Brett Leonard, Gimel Everett. *Produced by:* Gimel Everett. *Directed by:* Brett Leonard. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 107

minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After an accident in his laboratory, scientist Larry Angelo (Brosnan) continues his experiments in virtual reality outside "The Shop's" purview. Using a VR set-up in his home in the suburbs, Angelo attempts to evolve the mind of the local lawnmower man, simpleton Jobe Smith (Fahey). The experiments succeed wildly, and Jobe becomes a virtual superman, a god of cyberspace. When Jobe threatens world domination, it's up to Angelo to destroy his own creation.

COMMENTARY: The box-office hit *The Lawnmower Man* consists of a bizarre creative equation. It was advertised as an adaptation of a short story from horrormeister Stephen King, a movie brand-name in America, though the film's story has nothing whatsoever to do with the master's tale of a runaway, hungry lawnmower on the attack.

In point of fact, however, this science run amok film owes far more to author Daniel Keyes and his 1966 novel *Flowers for Algernon* (made as a film in 1968 as *Charly*) than it does King's literary effort. The most significant difference from Keyes' tale is the script's focus on developing an intriguing technology of the 1990s—virtual reality—as the means by which a man of substandard intelligence is evolved to genius level and beyond.

Flowers for Algernon involved a character named Charlie Gordon, a man with an IQ of 68. After experimental surgery, Charlie's IQ increased to 185, and he became an intellectual giant, the envy of friends and co-workers. As a suddenly highly-functioning adult, he even began to develop a romance with his former teacher and move into the terrain of sexual relationships (one of the reasons why the book was one of the one hundred "most challenged" books in high school curriculums for the span 1990–1999, according to the American Library Association). The novel ended with Charlie regressing to his former state, losing all of his newfound intelligence and maturity.

The Lawnmower Man substitutes virtual reality technology for experimental surgery, but similarly involves a simpleton, Jobe Smith (Jeff Fahey), who becomes a genius and who, in the course of his quick maturation, becomes sexually active (this time with an affluent neighbor in the suburbs).

As is the case in *Flowers for Algernon*, with great intelligence comes a down-side, not envy ... but the development of ego and megalomania. Jobe comes to believe that, in the virtual reality realm, he is "God." He becomes not just a genius, but capable of telekinesis

and controlling all computers and devices connected to this "new electric dimension" of cyberspace. In the end, he doesn't regress to his former self, but he is trapped by his spiritual "father," Dr. Angelo (Brosnan), in the cyber-realm, without (seemingly) any hope of escape, or reaching out to the physical world. The ending, however, suggests that the brilliant Jobe has found just such an escape route.

The Lawnmower Man uses the paraphernalia of virtual reality games (head-mounted viewers that resemble binoculars, wired control gloves) and more to feature CGI excursions into cyberspace and to chart Jobe's progress through computer simulations and full-body immersion in artificial environments. At the time of the film, many people believed it was virtual reality which would soon change the world, offering three dimensional environments as the heir to video games, and opening up whole new social communities via computers. That didn't quite happen, and the Internet took off instead, a realm of email, communication and research, but not, importantly, "altered states."

In some senses then, *The Lawnmower Man* plays today as very dated. "This technology is going to change the world. It's the future," the screenplay insists, but so far ... not so much.



Jobe, the Devil of cyberspace, also from *The Lawnmower Man*.



Jobe (Jeff Fahey) the God of cyberspace in *The Lawnmower Man* (1992).

The Lawnmower Man dwells on the fear over a new technology, and Jobe literally transforms from a recognizable (and handsome) human male to a leviathan of the cyber-realm, a boogeyman guarding the gates, as it were, to the cyber world and the cyber experience. Although the film is clearly based in science fiction and technology, the horror arises from the misapplication of that technology. Jobe takes his lover, Marnie (Wright), into virtual reality and has cyber-sex with her there in the film's most intriguing sequence. We see their avatars become, essentially, a two-headed organism, and at first it is beautiful, and fascinating, a joining that suggests a true melding of bodies. But then Marnie starts to panic and gets trapped in some cyber ooze, and what was at first erotic turns terrifying.

Another sequence depicts exactly how the power-hungry Jobe intends to cleanse "a diseased planet," by projecting himself out of cyberspace into our reality and by disassembling his enemies, molecule by molecule. Exactly how he acquired this terrifying ability is left vague, but it makes Jobe a legitimate 1990s rubber-reality boogeyman, one who—like Freddy Krueger—has extended his reach beyond another plane of existence (the dream state; cyber-space) into our consensus reality.

The Lawnmower Man is an interesting relic of the 1990s, even if its prediction that the technology portrayed in the film would be "in

widespread use" by the "end of the decade" and the warning that is "a new form of mind control" proved totally unfounded and even absurd. But the film's final sequence, with Jobe ringing telephones all over the world simultaneously to herald his arrival ... and conquest of cyberspace, remains a chilling sequence, perhaps the ultimate alarm bell and wake-up call of science run amok in the 1990s.

***Needful Things* * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Ed Harris (Sheriff Alan Pangborn); Max von Sydow (Leland Gault); Bonnie Bedelia (Polly); J.T. Walsh (Danforth Keaton); Valerie Bromfield (Wilma Jerzyk); Shane Meier (Brian Rusk); Duncan Fraser (Hugh Priest); Amanda Plummer (Nettie); Ray McKinnon (Norris Ridgewick); W. Morgan Sheppard (Father Meehan); Don S. Davis (the Reverend Rose); Campbell Lane (Frank); Eric Dchneider (Henry Beaufort); Frank C. Turner (Pete Jerzyk).

CREW: Castle Rock Entertainment in association with New Line Cinema presents a Fraser C. Heston film. *Based on the book by:* Stephen King. *Casting:* Mary Gail Artz, Barbara Cohen. *Associate Producer:* Gordon Mark. *Music:* Patrick Doyle. *Film Editor:* Rob Kobrin. *Production Designer:* Douglas Higgins. *Director of Photography:* Tony Westman. *Executive Producer:* Peter Yates. *Written by:* W.D. Richter. *Produced by:* Jack Cummins. *Directed by:* Fraser C. Heston. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 120 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A new antique shop, *Needful Things*, opens in quaint Castle Rock, Maine. The mysterious owner, Leland Gault (Sydow), quickly sets the townpeople at each other's throats by offering them strange collectibles, items they want in return for anonymous attacks and pranks on their neighbors and friends. Town sheriff Alan Pangborn (Harris) begins to investigate when the pranks escalate to murder and comes to realize that Gault is nothing less than the Devil himself.

COMMENTARY: Stephen King's 1991 masterpiece *Needful Things* was written as a deliberate response to what the king of horror saw happening to America in the 1980s. Specifically, King noted:

It occurred to me that in the eighties, everything had come with a price tag, that the decade quite literally was the sale of the century. The final items up on the block had been honor, integrity, self-respect, and innocence ... I decided to turn the eighties into a small-town curio shop called *Needful Things* and see what happened.³¹

King wasn't the first prominent American to note the tendency towards conspicuous consumption, vanity and an insatiable obsession with owning material things. As far back as 1979, President Jimmy Carter had pinpointed this very issue as a problem. In his famous and prophetic "Crisis of Confidence" speech, President Carter noted: "In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns."

President George H.W. Bush, Reagan's successor, longed for a "kinder, gentler" nation by the end of that decade. Not gonna happen, to coin a phrase. But in the early 1990s, yuppie horror movies—movies in which yuppie values were exposed and ridiculed—responded to his wish. Highly moral horrors, one that stressed *consequences*, came to the forefront of the genre. And an adaptation of *Needful Things* was among these.

Here, the Devil in disguise, a gentleman called Leland Gaunt and played by Max von Sydow, sets up shop on Main Street U.S.A. (Okay, Castle Rock in Maine), and sets about offering the residents everything their little hearts could desire. These folks are soon willing to trick, injure and even murder their neighbors for the acquisition of "needful" things.

One local child wants a Mickey Mantle trading card, believing ownership of such a collectible can bring him true happiness. All he needs to do is throw some apples through a farmhouse window.

Another resident, Danforth Keaton (Walsh), wants a horse-racing game made in the 1940s or 1950s, but he pays by becoming, ultimately, a pawn for Satan.



Leland Gaunt (Max von Sydow) tempts Nettie (Amanda Plummer) in the Stephen King adaptation *Needful Things* (1992).

Before long, even the local Catholic priest of Castle Rock is out puncturing tires with a knife to acquire the thing he covets, in what amounts to a sort of cosmic "pay-it-forward" of crime and violence.

The movie's point is that even the most pious of us is a *consumer*, out to get the things we believe will create happiness. This is a relevant message even beyond the 1980s. The roaring 1990s, after all, was the decade in which e-Bay first came into being, an international auction house aimed right at "collectors" hoping to, by purchasing items on auction, recapture their youth and more.

Furthermore, from 1990 to 2000, more than half the 15,800 "small towns" in America (towns like *Needful Things'* Castle Rock) lost "population."³² Interestingly, *Needful Things* seems to forecast the very way that so many small towns would be destroyed: by an interloper coming into town and offering seemingly irresistible bargains that

secretly carry a very high price. In this case, the Devil is named Wal-Mart. In *Executive Intelligence Review* in 2003, writer Richard Freeman argued this particular case:



A profile in loneliness: Nettie (Amanda Plummer) in *Needful Things*.

During the last 20 years, Wal-Mart has moved into communities and destroyed them, wiping out stores, slashing the tax base, and turning downtown areas into ghost-towns. This is accomplished through Wal-Mart's policy of paying workers below subsistence wages, and importing goods that have been produced under slave-labor conditions overseas. Often, communities will even give Wal-Mart tax incentives, for the right to be destroyed."³³

At least in the case of Castle Rock, there is heroic Alan Pangborn to make everyone take a step back from the spiritual rather than strictly economic precipice. In real life, laissez-faire business policies towards giant corporations like Wal-Mart continue.

Needful Things has a touch of Rod Serling's "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street," a *Twilight Zone* episode about suspicion, bigotry and the mob mentality brewing in American suburbia during a mysterious power-outage. In both cases, the underlying point is that it

is easy to subvert us, to play us against each other. *The Twilight Zone* uses bigotry and fear as the catalyst; *Needful Things* uses the desire to "have" things.

Director Fraser Heston does a particularly good job of selecting the music underscoring this battle between good and evil. Older pieces like Schubert's "Ave Maria" and Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King" from 1876 create the impression of the Devil's age, and that this gambit is a very old game for him. Meanwhile, pieces including "Great Balls of Fire" by Jerry Lee Lewis and 1990s hit "Achy Breaky Heart" are used to ironic effect.

Needful Things is a big sprawling book, and the movie is a simplified version, but a good and timely one. Von Sydow plays his role with glee and charm, and Ed Harris grounds all the proceedings with his character's sense of integrity and decency. The question the movie ultimately muses on so successfully is simply, what's your price? What's the price of your soul?

If everything is for sale, the question becomes, is anything sacred?

***Netherworld* * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michael Bendetti (Corey Thornton); Denise Gentile (Delores); Anjanette Connor (Mrs. Palmer); Holly Floria (Diane Palmer); Robert Sampson (Noah Thornton); Holly Butler (Marilyn Monroe); Alex Datcher (Mary Magdalene); Robert Burr (Beauregard Yates, Esq.); George Kelly (Bijou); Mark Kemble (Barbusoir); Barret O'Brien (Teen Boy); Michael Lowry (Stemmy); David Schomeller (Billy C.); Candice Williams (Child #1); Robert La Brosse (Barfighter); Linda Ljoka (Nona); Darlene Molero (Hodyen Harridan); Kelsie Chance (Nude Man); Helga Cavignac (Nude Woman).

CREW: Full Moon Entertainment Presents a David Schmoeller Film. *Casting:* Robert MacDonald, Perry Bullington. *Production Designer:* Billy Jett. *Costume Designer:* Lois Simbach. *Special Make-up Effects:* Mark Shostrum. *Director of Photography:* Adolfo Bartoli. *Music by:* David Bryan, Larry Fast. *Film Editors:* Carol Oblath, Andy Horvitch. *Story by:* Billy Chicago and Charles Band. *Screenplay by:* Billy Chicago. *Executive Producer:* Charles Band. *Produced by:* Thomas Bradford.

Directed by: David Schmoeller. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In search of the truth about his recently-deceased father (Sampson), young Corey Thornton (Bendetti) returns to the family mansion in the Louisiana Bayou, now cared for by Mrs. Palmer (Connor) and her "jailbait" daughter, Diane (Floria). Soon, Corey learns from his father's diary that he became sexually involved with a local witch, Delores (Gentile), who reputedly had the power over life and death, and who cast her spell on Mr. Thornton from the club/whorehouse on the next property, called Tom's. Corey meets Delores and becomes similarly infatuated with her, even as he hopes to resurrect his dead father using her black magic secrets.

COMMENTARY: *Netherworld* is one of the bestlooking Full Moon Entertainment horror movies of the 1990s, though that's not really saying much.

This is a sweaty, Southern-fried horror film with impressive location work on the bayou and some lovely American gothic coloring too: wainscoting on the walls, and old antebellum light fixtures hanging from the ceiling. The Thornton mansion exterior is beautiful and expansive too, even if its beauty is badly undercut by the presence of a less-than-picturesque whorehouse on the adjoining property. Someone ought to look into the business zoning laws.

The drenched atmosphere of *Netherworld* is so hothouse florid, in fact, that when our protagonist, Corey (Bendetti), first presses a kiss against the apparent femme fatale, Delores (Gentile), steam actually rises from his lips.

Now *that's* hot...

Netherworld is filled with interesting flourishes like that. For instance, all the prostitutes in "Tom's" are celebrities resurrected from the dead: Marilyn Monroe and Mary Magdalene, for instance. Nothing important in the narrative really arises of this fact, but it's interesting, and Datcher (as Mary) is beguiling during her brief screen time.

And then there's the fat guy and friend of Corey's father who seems to have a slobbering, homosexual desire for Corey ... but that's never really spelled out or explained either.

And finally, we get a flying stone statue of a human hand careening all over the place. It "lives" it seems, on Dad's crypt, and pries itself loose to attack those who menace Corey, like demanding, angry johns at the whorehouse. The five-fingered beast flies, *Phantasm* ball-style, from location to location, strangling and bloodying victims

(and one finger has a little serpent's mouth with sharp teeth). How does it fly? Again, who knows?

The underlying plot of *Netherworld* is authentically of the Edgar Allan Poe variety, concerning (Southern) aristocracy, decay, madness and the terrors of the soul. Here, Corey's father has laid a diabolical trap for him: he wants his boy to visit him in the Underworld/*Netherworld* so that he can take over his progeny's body. In fact, good old dad lasciviously licks his lips and rolls his tongue at the sight of Corey's fit, athletic form, a real bit of decadence. "Christ died for his Dad, what are you complaining about?" he quips.

But before you can say "talk to the hand," the flying hand statue intervenes in Dad's body switching scheme and prevents Corey from transforming into a cement statue on his father's crypt. We know this metamorphosis is occurring because the actor playing Corey wears, for a moment, cement-colored socks.

There's a great deal of bird imagery in *Netherworld*, and the witches are sort of "bird people" according to the script. The movie is like a bird in a way too, alighting here and there on fun concepts and interesting moments, but never resting long enough in one spot to really develop any of them.

After eighty minutes the movie effortlessly flies away and you hardly remember it was ever there at all.

Pet Sematary 2 * * .

Critical Reception

"A mean-spiritedness hangs so triumphantly over this sequel to the popular 1989 Stephen King movie that rather than being classically morbid, this horror tale is grossly sickening and nihilistic in its statements about man's humanity to animals, not to mention man himself.... It's a thoroughly unpleasant viewing experience with its touches of physical abuse to children and a scene of a deputy sheriff Clancy Brown shooting his stepson's dog in cold blood."—John Stanley, *Creature Features Strikes Again!* Creatures-at-Large Press, 1994, page 295

Cast and Crew

CAST: Edward Furlong (Jeff Matthews); Anthony Edwards (Chase Matthews); Clancy Brown (Gus Gilbert); Jared Rushton (Clyde Parker); Darlanne Fluegel (Renee Hallow); Jason McGuire (Drew Gilbert); Sarah Trigger (Marjorie Hargrove); Lisa Waltz (Amanda Gilbert); Jim Peck (Quentin Yolander); Len Hunt (Frank); Reid Binion (Brad); David Ratajczak (Stevie); Lucious Houghton (Puppeteer). Wilbur Fitzgerald (First A.D.) Elizabeth Ziegler (Steadicam Operator).

CREW: Paramount Pictures Presents a Mary Lambert Film.

Castings: Richard Pagano Sharon Bialy, Debi Manwiller. *Music:* Mark Governor. *Costume Designer:* Marlene Stewart. *Film Editor:* Tom Finan. *Production Designer:* Michelle Minch. *Director of Photography:* Russell Carpenter. *Written by:* Richard Outten. *Produced by:* Ralph S. Singleton. *Directed by:* Mary Lambert. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After his mother, a famous actress (Fluegel), dies in a freak accident on the set of her latest film, teenage Jeff (Furlong) moves in with his estranged father, Chase (Edwards), the new veterinarian in the Maine town of Ludlow. There, he meets wimpy Drew Gilbert (McGuire) and his abusive father, Gus (Brown), who is also the town sheriff. When Zowie, Drew's dog, dies, the boys bury him in the Indian burial ground capable of bringing the dead back to life. Before long, people are going into the ground there too, including Gus, and—if Jeff has anything to say about it—his dead mother as well.

COMMENTARY: Mary Lambert's *Pet Sematary* (1989) is a classic, brilliantly-crafted horror film based on an equally great book by Stephen King, one that asks basic questions about death, mortality, and the bonds of family. Lambert directed that original film with ample style and gusto, and returns to the same position for this largely unnecessary but not entirely unworthy sequel. Here, Lambert endows her film with a powerful Northeastern Gothic atmosphere of gloom and doom, and more than that, focuses like a laser beam on the franchise's central message: *You never really get over death; but you have to live with it.*



Mary Lambert helms the horror sequel *Pet Sematary Two* (1992).

Because the only alternative— *revivified, rampaging corpses*— is much, much worse than simple grief. Given this viewpoint, *Pet Sematary II* is a very nasty, brutal movie. A boy's mother dies within his eyesight ... twice, and the second time, audiences actually get to see her face melt.

Worse than that, an abusive law-enforcement official, played with maniacal glee by Clancy Brown, returns from the grave even more monstrous than he was as a mortal, now obsessed with raping his wife and skinning and gutting small animals.

There is real domestic violence portrayed here too, plus terrifying violence directed at children to boot. Brown's character pulps one boy's face in the spinning wheel of a motorbike during an unbelievably sadistic moment. Later, while attempting to escape Gus, teenager Drew and his abused Mom die in a terrible car wreck. Lambert spares the audience nothing. But death is ugly and final, and Lambert shouldn't spare the audience. That said, Lambert really swings into an unfettered, gloriously malicious groove here, a groove that grants *Pet Sematary 2* some sizzle and power. The movie may be about ugliness, but the ugliness gets the director's point across.

Like nineties directorial counterparts including Wes Craven, Lambert has crafted a film with a deliberate selfreflexive quality. The first scene in the film involves a moviewithin-a-movie, like *New Night* -

mare (1994), and it ends with the unexpected death of a Hollywood actress. It's no coincidence that she dies on the set of a horror film wearing a diaphanous gown, the uniform of the genre's damsel-in-distress since time immemorial.

The horror genre is one of the few (if not the only one) to focus explicitly on death and to obsess (at its best) on the meaning of death. *Pet Semetary 2* seems to draw an early, important connection. We are all obsessed with mortality, but it is how we deal with it that's important.

Or, to put it bluntly, a horror movie is probably an appropriate outlet for curiosity about death—resurrecting your Mom is not. Or as the movie eloquently states, "life is full of lessons. No one's above 'em."

On the downside, *Pet Semetary 2* features some dodgy special effects and Anthony Edwards seems as if he's cruising on auto-pilot. Edward Furlong is perfect for this material. The youthful actor seems legitimately sullen and anti-social following his Mom's death, and one has no trouble believing he could consign her corpse to the Indian Burial Ground.

Yet the movie probably belongs to Clancy Brown's Gus, who returns to life in surprisingly functional and jovial fashion. He is more sadistic than ever, and Clancy Brown indulges in a rampage with a hammer in what amounts to a lowrent variation on Nicholson's performance in *The Shining* (1980).

Lambert has a lot of fun being bad in *Pet Semetary 2*, and her throw-caution-to-the-wind approach grants the film a dangerous edge in a decade of mostly-toothless, ineffective franchise sequels. Here, for once, is a sequel that means business, doesn't play favorites, and indulges willy-nilly in sadism and ugliness to make its valuable point.

Say it with me now: *Dead is better. Dead is better. Dead is better.*

Poison Ivy * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Drew Barrymore (Ivy); Tom Skerritt (Darryl Cooper); Sara Gilbert (Sylvie Cooper); Cheryl Ladd (Georgie Cooper); Alan Stock (Bob); Jeanne Sakata (Isabelle); E.J. Moore (Kid); J.B. Quon (Another Kid); Leonardo DiCaprio (Gy); Michael Goldner (Man in Car); Charley Hayward (Tiny); Billy Kane (James).

CREW: New Line Cinema Presents in association with Andy Ruben and MG Entertainment a Katt Shea Ruben film. *Casting:* Jeffery Passero. *Costume Designer:* Ellen Tracy Gross. *Music:* David Michael Frank. *Production Designer:* Virginia Lee. *Film Editor:* Gina Mittelman. *Director of Photography:* Phedon Papamichael. *Co-Producer:* Rick Nathanson. *Co-Executive Producer:* Marjorie Lewis. *Executive Producer:* Peter Morgan, Melissa Godard. *Based upon a story by:* Melissa Godard and Peter Morgan. *Written by:* Andy Ruben, Katt Shea Ruben. *Produced by:* Andy Ruben. *Directed by:* Katt Shea Ruben. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An insecure young woman, Sylvie Cooper (Gilbert), befriends the wild and edgy Ivy (Barrymore), a teenager who claims to have been abandoned by her father. Sylvie's Dad, Darryl (Skerritt), is a conservative radio show host, and her young mother, Georgie (Ladd), is dying of emphysema. Very quickly, Ivy sees a way to infiltrate this family unit and sets about doing whatever it takes to win Darryl's affection and get Georgie out of the way.

COMMENTARY: A young interloper, played to sexy perfection by Drew Barrymore, invades an affluent American household in the hypnotic *Poison Ivy*. The film's director, Katt Shea Ruben, has an artist's eye for erotic detail and is also a fine writer. This is one erotic horror where the script is as at least as good, at least as smart as the overtly sexual material.

Poison Ivy charts a form of class warfare, as a have-not named Ivy attempts to worm her way into wealth. She notes to her new friend Sylvie that "not everyone gets to go home in a Mercedes" and then does her darndest to turn Darryl's eye, even dressing up in his wife's sexy red cocktail dress and arranging for Sylvie's absence on the night of a big party.

Though he preaches good old-fashioned conservative values, Darryl ends up sexually enmeshed with Ivy, a fact which rips apart his family and causes him to lose his job. It's the Lolita syndrome again: an older man with a much younger woman. And it's a relationship that gained infamy in the 1990s, thanks to Bill Clinton's dalliance with intern Monica Lewinsky. At least he didn't preach family values beforehand.

Ivy's attack in *Poison Ivy* is multi-pronged. In an egregious example of symbolic barrierbreaking, she starts to secretly feed Sylvie's pet dog special treats so the animal will love her, not Sylvie. Stealing someone's Dad is one thing. But stealing man's best friend? Dirty pool...

By *Poison Ivy*'s climax, Ivy has murdered Mom, taken Mom's car out for a joy ride and wrecked it (blaming Sylvie for the accident), and committed other horrors too. As ever, the point in these interloper movies seems to be not to let unfamiliar faces (and usually women) into the sacred circle of family.

Also in keeping with the format's rules, Darryl is complicit in the blame for all the misery Ivy wreaks. He starts drinking again at her behest, and, of course, he has sex with her, on the hood of his car, no less.

What makes *Poison Ivy* a good example of the interloper subgenre, in part, is that all the *dramatis personae* are craven attention seekers to one degree or another. Sylvie lies to Ivy and tells her that she has an African American father. She also claims she attempted to take her own life. Meanwhile, Sylvie's mom, Georgie, spends her whole life dying, melodramatically standing at an open window in her expensive nightwear and waxing poetic about a life taken too early. Darryl, Sylvie's dad, is a radio star who makes hay by preaching family values and attacking a liberal society.

As for Ivy, she states she's "always out of place" but quickly learns how to draw attention to herself, whether it's via a lesbian kiss with Sylvie or by borrowing Mom's clothes (a common trick of the cinematic interloper; see *Single White Female*).

But what is Ivy's end-game? Unlike the attention seekers in the Cooper family, the movie suggests that Ivy is only seeking that which they already possess, a loving family. Although it is clearly wrong for Ivy to wear Mom's clothes, sleep in her bed, and fuck Dad, it's not entirely clear that she's doing it just for purely selfish reasons. When Sylvie accuses Ivy of murdering her mother, Ivy replies that Georgie "wanted to die." There seems to be some truth to her statement, but more telling is her next comment. "We can all be a family now." Yep, it's a twisted and selfish wish, but there's also something tragic, psychotic and lonely in it too.

Katt Shea Ruben proves tremendously effective directing this material. Right from the first scene, she seems to visually fetishize Barrymore's interloping character. The movie opens with Barrymore erotically riding a rope-swing in slow motion photography. The back-and-forth, slowed down and extended, plays as highly sensual.

Then, in voice over, Sylvia begins to describe Barrymore's persona. She discusses her lips, which are "supposed to be a perfect reflection of another part of a woman's anatomy" and then Sylvia wonders if she is a lesbian. The point, established in the compositions, is that dewy, young Ivy is absolutely irresistible. To everyone.

Youth is always irresistible, but there's something more here too, and Shea Ruben's camera gets that as well. It's the danger. Each character in the film judges that danger and determines for him or herself how close to get to the fire. And, in every case, they end up getting burned.

Even after the lines of family have been crossed, even after Ivy kills Georgie and attempts to seduce Darryl, even after her death, Sylvie confides that she still thinks about her. Some people are just like that. They find their way into your life and for better or worse, set it off in a different, irreversible direction. Really, that's what the interloper movies are all about, about people who get too close before we learn that they are dangerous, evil or psychotic. In *Poison Ivy*, however, the pull of this interloper is irresistible and an American family ends up destroyed.

LEGACY: A sequel, *Poison Ivy II: Lilly* (1996) followed this film, but did not deal so explicitly with the interloper/horror theme of Shea Ruben's movie. That sequel featured Alyssa Milano and more closely gazed at issues around sexual awakening and obsession than the destruction of a family unit. *Poison Ivy: The New Seduction* (1997) returned the franchise to interloper themes of the original and was perhaps the most overtly horror-oriented of the series.

***Prom Night IV: Deliver Us from Evil* * * .**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Nikki De Boer (Meagan); Alden Kane (Mark); Jay Tanner (Laura); Alle Ghadban (Jeff); Ken McGregor (Father Jaeger); Brock Simpson (Father Jonas); Krista Bulmer (Lisa); Phil Morrison (Brad); Fab Filippo (Jonathan); Colin Simpson (Larry); Billy Jay (Cardinal); Deni Delroy (Jennifer); Brad Simpson (Rick).

CREW: Norstar Entertainment Inc. presents a Peter Simpson production. *Casting:* Lucinda Sill. *Production Designer:* Ian Brock. *Music:* Paul J. Zaza. *Film Editor:* Stan Cole. *Director of Photography:* Rick Wincenty. *Executive Producer:* Peter Simpson. *Written by:* Richard Beattie. *Produced by:* Ray Sagar. *Directed by:* Clay Borris. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A deranged young priest, Jonas (Carver), murders two

fornicating teens at the Hamilton High Senior Prom of 1957. After being catatonic and locked away in a church basement for thirty-three years, the evil Jonas awakens and resumes his killing ways. He pursues the lovely Meagan (De Boer) and her friends, Jeff (Ghadban) and Laura (Tanner).

COMMENTARY: Eschewing the tongue-in-cheek tone of its predecessor, *Prom Night IV: Deliver Us from Evil* is an old school, retro-eighties treat, a latter-day example of the once-popular slasher paradigm. The movie from Clay Borris offers such components of that format as the final girl, the P.O.V. stalk shot and even the transgression or "crime from the past." Buttressed by a *Halloween*-styled theme and an attractive and likeable lead in Nikki De Boer, this sequel is a slimmed-down, back-to-basics horror and a relatively effective one at that.

Some of the material in *Prom Night IV* is admittedly pretty derivative. The priest who becomes a slasher/murderer is talked about as though he is Michael Myers himself, and in terms that Dr. Sam Loomis would no doubt appreciate. The other priests describe him as "evil beyond imagination." They lock him away for decades, away from society because "there is no other way."

Well, before long, Father Jonas is back on the loose and murdering nubile young teenagers, ones who joke about "Jamie Lee Curtis" and play practical jokes on one another, a familiar conceit from the slasher paradigm. If one stops to consider that the murders take place around an event (a prom) and that vice precedes slice-and-dice, the movie's adherence to the form is complete.

But the film isn't always good, or consistent. For instance, Meagan's friend, Laura, plants a lesbian-like kiss on her early in the film, but it's just a practical joke. Later when people are disappearing, Meagan's boyfriend concludes that Jonas's acts must be part of a joke. "Laura wouldn't do that," Meagan replies.

Hello! She just pretended to be a lesbian and came onto you, but she's above playing hide and go seek on prom night?

Despite inconsistencies in the script, *Prom Night IV* moves quickly, is visually distinguished with all of its imposing, low angle shots of Christian-style architecture and even relatively wellacted. If you find yourself in the mood for an oldfashioned slasher film with an unstoppable, Michael Myers-like killer, *Prom Night IV* delivers the evil.

"Although De Palma's pop-psychologizing adds a curious wrinkle, the tortuous, confusing plot turns this chiller medium cool. Still, Lithgow's masterful acting is probably worth watching for its own sake, if you like this sort of stuff."— Steve Hopkins, *Alberta Report/News magazine*, "Some Inspired Pop Psychologizing Energizes a Nasty Little Horror Story," July 26, 1993, Volume 20, Issue 32, page 36

"Brian DePalma's return to the horror genre, in which he first achieved wide celebrity, is, despite a number of cinematically interesting blind alleys, both insubstantial and something of a cheat. He promises far more than he delivers in *Raising Cain*."— Harry Pearson, *Films in Review*, "Film Reviews," November/December 1992, Volume 43, Issue 11/12, page 413

"John Lithgow takes on a multitude of roles in this practically forgotten Brian De Palma thriller. The sheer talent of Lithgow helps support the sometimes ludicrous plot and it truly is a joy to watch him take on the different parts with such relish."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: John Lithgow (Carter Nix/Dr. Nix/ Cain/Margo); Lolita Davidovitch (Jenny); Steven Bauer (Jack); Frances Sternhagen (Dr. Waldheim); Gregg Henry (Lt. Terri); Tom Bower (Sgt. Cally); Mel Harris (Sarah); Teri Austen (Karen); Gabrielle Carteris (Nan); Amanda Pombo (Emma).

CREW: Universal Pictures Presents a Pacific-Western film, a Brian De Palma Film. *Casting:* Pam Dixon. *Costume Designer:* Bobbi Reed. *Music:* Pino Donaggio. *Film Editors:* Paul Hirsch, Bonnie Koehler, Robert Dalva. *Production Designer:* Doug Kraner. *Director of Photography:* Stephen H. Burum. *Produced by:* Gale Anne Hurd. *Written and directed by:* Brian De Palma. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Mild-mannered Carter Nix (John Lithgow), a child psychologist who has given up his successful medical practice to raise his only child, Amy (Amanda Pombo), also suffers from multiple-personality syndrome. Carter dwells in the shadow of his famous father, a child psychiatrist who may or may not still be alive, and who may have returned to his work experimenting on abducted children.

When his sexy wife, Jenny (Davidovitch), has an affair with an old flame, Jack (Bauer), Carter's murderous alternate personality, Cain is aroused to consciousness. And when someone abducts Carter's daughter, another personality comes to life ... the mysterious Margo.

COMMENTARY: Still reeling from the critical and box-office meltdown of *The Bonfire of the Vanities* in 1990, director Brian De Palma quietly slid back into what some critics deemed "familiar territory" for his 1992 follow-up film, *Raising Cain*. The artist who had so cunningly crafted transgressive psychological thrillers such *Obsession* (1976), *Dressed to Kill* (1980), *Blow Out* (1981) and *Body Double* (1984) appeared—at least on the surface—to be making a strategic retreat to safer celluloid ground.

Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Even the film's title reveals this axiom: *Raising Cain* literally concerns Brian De Palma "raising hell" with cinematic forms, conventions and types to the confusion of some, and the derision of many. A close analysis of *Raising Cain*, however, reveals that the film is an intricate narrative maze that routinely shifts or fractures audience perspective, thereby echoing the film's content, which concerns a man suffering from a multiple personality disorder.



Torn between two lovers. *Top:* Jenny (Lolita Davidovitch) and her lover, Jack (Steven Bauer), make love. *Bottom:* Jenny (David) and Dr. Carter Nix (John Lithgow), embrace. From Brian De Palma's *Raising Cain* (1992).

Raising Cain is also a highly-reflexive thriller that embodies the multiple "creative" voices competing inside De Palma's head (from Hitchcock to Godard to Buñuel to Powell). The film even brazenly illuminates the director's own existential crisis at this point in his career: the canard that he is slavishly re-creating the work of his artistic "fathers" instead of establishing his own unique identity.

Finally, *Raising Cain* deftly and subversively functions as a caustic social satire, a brutal comedy of manners much like *Dressed to Kill*) but this time the subject is definitively American masculinity, particularly the so-called "crisis in masculinity" that commenced in the late 1980s and continued unabated through the 1990s into the first Bush era.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the fantasy of the American man being a "hero" or "conqueror"—or even the sole bread winner in a traditional nuclear family— was being torn apart at the seams. Terms like "Mr. Mom" entered the pop culture lexicon in the mideighties after a 1983 comedy starring Michael Keaton unexpectedly became a hit. The nickname was utilized, often derisively, to describe a man who stayed home to raise children while his wife went to work outside the home and functioned as "the hunter-gatherer."

Could a man still be "a man" in the 1990s if he didn't hold down a job? If he stayed home and raised the children? Would women find this 1990s breed of man attractive, absent the more rugged qualities that had made him the Dragon-slayer in generations past?

In her book *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, author Susan Jefford argued that "the masculine way has almost run its course ... the point at which no alternatives are left."³⁴ Because of scandals (including Iran Contra and Astrology-Gate), American alpha males—including President Reagan—had been transformed from icons of laudable masculinity to mock-able figures of fun: imbecilic, daft, and confused. The new president, George Bush, was disregarded far and wide in the press as a "wimp." When he threw up on high-ranking Japanese officials at a state dinner, it was even worse.

Meanwhile, women had not only made significant in-roads in the workplace, but had also served with great distinction in the American military during the Gulf War (1991), further blurring traditional definitions of gender. Another dividing line for the nation also occurred in 1991, when Clarence Thomas, a nominee for the Supreme Court, faced a contentious confirmation hearing. He had allegedly made lewd remarks to a female co-worker, Anita Hill. But were his actions the very definition of sexual harassment, or was he enjoying dirty jokes and flirting with a female colleague? What could a man safely say in the 1990s, in the presence of a professional woman? Where was the new line of "appropriateness" to be drawn?

Others viewed the "crisis in masculinity" in a different fashion. Author Brian Baker noted in *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres, 1945–2000* that the failure of masculinity in modern America was a result of men not being too assertive, but of men not being assertive enough. The men of the

1980s and 1990s were simply "re-capitulating the mistakes" of their fathers, men of the post-war generation.³⁵

In other words, inadequate father figures and a new a culture promoting "sensitivity" had defanged a generation of men. The culture was becoming ... feminized. I'm not coming down on one side of this argument or the other, just noting that it was a topic of the times and, as such, part of *Raising Cain's* context.

And indeed, this social concern plays out explicitly in the film. The kindly Carter is a touchyfeely milquetoast who lives in thrall to the real alpha male in his life: his father (a robust, arrogant man of the post-war generation). His dad is a world-renowned achiever; Carter is just a "regular" psychologist. Carter is indeed a loving father, one who spends more than mere "quality time" with his daughter, Amy. And yet his wife, Jenny, is not at all happy with him about his sensitivity and caring. One small, outward sign of this festering problem: Jenny doesn't even take Carter's family name ... calling herself Jenny O'Keefe instead of Jenny Nix (forecasting, perhaps, the whole Hilary Rodham kerfuffle).

At one point in the film, Jenny laments that Carter, the successful child psychologist, has given up his profitable practice for child-rearing and left her to work full time outside the home. The freedom she has secured for herself (to be either a career woman or a mother, at her discretion), is not one extended to Carter. Because he has forsaken the hunter-gatherer role, she no longer respects him. And because she no longer respects him, she also no longer sees Carter as sexually desirable.

Early in *Raising Cain*, Carter attempts to make love to Jenny, but stops suddenly when he hears Amy crying in her nearby bedroom. Jenny is angry with Carter over this act of coitus interruptus, and soon has an adulterous affair with Jack, a man who clearly has his "sexual" priorities straight. Despite the fact that Jenny is married and the mother of a small child, Jack brazenly makes love to her in a park. In fact, Jack and Jenny first shared a kiss at the exact moment that Jack's sick wife passed away in a hospital room ... just feet away from them (and within the dying woman's line of sight!). So Jack is a throwback, the kind of man who society tells us is not supposed to be cherished anymore ... but clearly is cherished by some women. In fact, Jack is seen as sexually powerful, whereas Carter is a wimpy cuckold.

Carter's many alternate personalities also expose further the crisis in masculinity. Cain is seen as inherently disreputable. He's a smoker for one thing (another big no-no in the Age of Political Correctness), and he's also, well, psychotic. Yet, Cain is the "man of action." Carter

outsources his dirty work to Cain, because as a "sensitive" modern male he is deemed incapable of protecting himself or his family. When Carter gets into trouble attempting to subdue Karen, a local mother, Cain suggests that Carter kiss her to allay the suspicions of passers-by. This is something that would never occur to the diffident Carter, but it is a solution which jumps out immediately to Cain. Cain is Id, through and through. The voice we all hear, but rarely act upon.

Yet another of Carter's personalities, Josh, has regressed to boyhood. He's a terrified child, one constantly fearing the wrath of his father. Again—not entirely unlike Carter—Josh is an image of masculinity reverted to a "harmless" or impotent stage, pre-adolescent, and therefore pre-sexual.

Finally, the guardian of the children is the personality named Margo. Importantly, Margo is female. Margo rescues Amy, destroys the Elder Dr. Nix, and restores order. It is a woman, therefore, who finally usurps the role of "hero"/"conqueror" in modern America. Carter can only become a hero when he is ... female. The film's valedictory shot is of a looming, powerful Margo, standing heroically behind his family (Jenny and Amy). Carter could only be himself, a caring individual and care-giver, when in the personality and guise of a woman ... and the last shot explains this visually. Margo is not menacing, not evil. She is triumphant.

Yep, that's a crisis in masculinity, all right. *Raising Cain* is thus a satire, exposing the schizophrenic, contradictory messages sometimes sent by our culture to men of the day. They were expected to "cowboy up" and "be a man" ... except when they were supposed to be "sensitive" and "express" their feelings. They were supposed to support the family financially, except in those situations when a woman wanted to do so herself. They were supposed to be committed fathers but never usurp the sacred role of the primary parent: the mother. In *Raising Cain*, Carter is crazy, splintered into a million pieces over the competing pressures conspiring against him. Ultimately, the only way he can self-actualize is by becoming, literally, a woman.

Throughout the film, Carter is almost constantly besieged by images of perfect women. After kidnapping a little boy, he drives to his idyllic, fairy tale house, and a gorgeous woman pushing an ivory white baby carriage is seen walking across the sidewalk. She is society's image of a perfect parent ... something Carter can never be; at least not until he becomes Margo.

Later, Jenny appears briefly inside a heartshaped icon on a TV set at a local shop celebrating Valentine's Day. This image reminds us that Carter—the milquetoast—can never capture his wife's "heart."

Indeed, in that very scene, Jack returns to stake his claim on it. Jenny's friend, played by Mel Harris, states that Carter is the "perfect man," but Jenny is already thinking of ways to get out of the marriage to be with Jack, the man who really makes her heart go aflutter (even if he doesn't take care of children). So Carter's final transformation into Margo is a sort of twisted joke on the old proverb: "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

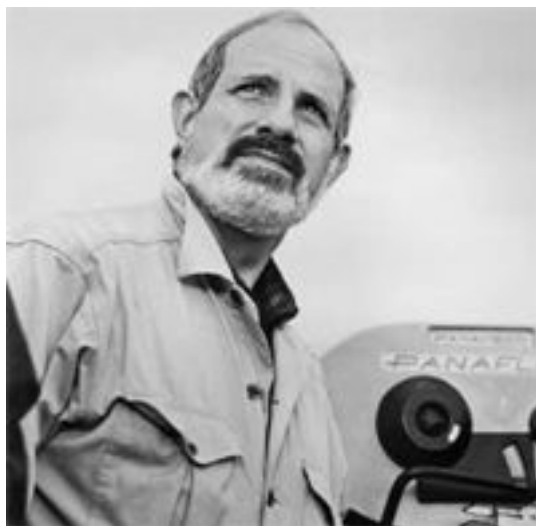
In some very important sense, Brian De Palma suffers the same existential crisis as Carter Nix in *Raising Cain*. Both men toil under the expansive shadows of their famous "fathers," either biological or spiritual. De Palma is always being called "The New Hitchcock" or "The American Godard," but these labels always contextualize him in terms of other filmmakers, of spiritual cinematic patriarchs. Rarely is he seen as the pioneer, the trail-blazer, only the second-comer. In *Raising Cain*, De Palma once more acknowledges his debts to such cinematic "fathers" with deliberate homage. Think of this, essentially, as Carter going to work in the same profession as his dad. Foremost among these tributes, De Palma pays respect to director Michael Powell and his film, *Peeping Tom* (1960). That movie involved an adult man, Mark Lewis (Carl Boehm), who was actually a murderer. His violence stemmed from the fact that Mark's father experimented on him as a boy, testing his responses to fear, horror, and death. His Dad then recorded those responses on camera, fostering a strange pathology in Mark, one involving cameras. Importantly, Mark's father was also a psychologist, very much like Dr. Nix.

In *Raising Cain*, young Carter is also experimented upon, essentially made into a multiple personality case. Like Mark, all of Carter's responses are charted, dissected and recorded. And also like Mark, Carter enters "the family business" after a fashion, even installing cameras in his daughter's bedroom, to gauge her responses. This may be De Palma's expression of the insidious nature of child abuse: a cycle of violence that passes from generation to generation. But regardless of the thematic similarities, it's clear that Carter of *Raising Cain* and Mark of *Peeping Tom* are both "weak" sons abused by "bad fathers." Both are carrying on in the family biz; both are mad as hatters.

Almost universally, De Palma develops his homage a step beyond the source material rather than merely imitating them, and that is also true in *Raising Cain*. Mark ultimately kills himself in *Peeping Tom*, but Carter—in *Raising Cain*'s final moments—doesn't die. His blood is never spilled to satisfy society. Instead, Carter is (willfully) sublimated inside the matriarchal protector, Margo. It's a place where he can finally feel safe behind the protector and "Big Sister." Carter may no

longer be the primary personality, but he is not wiped out either. Instead, his journey may even be one of self-actualization. In Margo's body, he can be the loving, protecting mother that we must presume that Carter never had.

Another spiritual father to De Palma is Alfred Hitchcock, and again we see him paying homage here. Once more, *Psycho* appears to be the wellspring for De Palma's creativity since we get a variation on Norman's disposal of bodies (in a swamp), and also the re-appearance of a man dressed as a woman (also deployed in De Palma's *Dressed to Kill*). Again, it's important to stress that this is not just mindless or rote repetition of familiar *Psycho* sequences. Instead, De Palma takes the material and twists and turns it to new purpose. For instance, after apparently dying in the Half Moon Swamp, Jenny surprisingly re-emerges to challenge Cain ... something which never occurred to Marion. And far from being a villain (like Bates), Margo—the man as woman—is *Raising Cain's* undeniable hero. She single-handedly rescues the children from the evil Dr. Nix.



Brian De Palma directs Universal Picture's *Raising Cain* (1992), a psychological nightmare. Mother

What's more interesting, perhaps, than the homage to the "fathers" (Hitchcock, Powell, perhaps even Buñuel) is the clear self-reflexive aspect of *Raising Cain*. Here—after a dramatic career failure—De Palma is seen as taking up his life's work, which—not coincidentally—was the life work of Hitchcock: the formalist cinematic thriller. Just as Carter takes up Nix's work, De Palma resumes his Hitchcockian phase. But, just as Carter transforms, De Palma transforms too. He takes this Hitchcockian thriller to an apex

never before imagined, and he does so by giving the film not just one perspective, but many.

What ultimately makes *Raising Cain* something more than a clever pastiche of *Peeping Tom* or *Psycho* is De Palma's purposeful splintering of the narrative in terms of audience identification point.

In *Psycho*, Alfred Hitchcock moved our central identification from Marion to Norman (in time for a surprise, climactic reveal). *Raising Cain* multiplies this feat by transferring our fulcrum of identification from Carter to Jenny to Jack, to Waldheim, and on and on, *ad infinitum*. We therefore get dreams within dreams, delusions and hallucinations (featuring the invisible Cain), and even transferences of identities (from Carter to Josh to Margo).

In some cases, we see the same events repeated from a variety of perspectives, notably Josh's observance of Cain committing the murder of an 18-year-old babysitter (Gabrielle Charteris). Time seems to overwrite itself in one scene involving the final disposition of two gift clocks. We double back, then burst forward.

When all this back-and-forth must at last be explained to the just-barely-keeping-up audience, De Palma proceeds in snake-like, coiled fashion. He brilliantly stages an elaborate, lengthy tracking shot (approximately five minutes in duration) that follows two police detectives and Dr. Waldheim from the top floor of a police station down two stair-cases, through an elevator, down into the morgue, where the shot ends on a close-up of a corpse's horrified expression.

All throughout this masterful, unbroken shot, Waldheim explains the history of the Nix family and the theories underlying multiple personality disorders. She basically describes the events of the movie (Cain vs. Carter) in a fashion that makes sense out of perspectives we've witnessed thus far. It's a journey from the top of Carter's mind, literally, to the bottom ... to Cain's mind, where we spy his murderous handiwork: the corpse.

De Palma understands that form must echo content, and so his film's form—multiple perspectives coming together—reflects the flotsam and jetsam of Carter's splintered mind. The virtuoso unbroken shot is Waldheim's tour of that mind, a narrative maze of twists and turns, of science and ultimately death. But importantly, this tour is an unbroken one (like Waldheim's dissertation), making linear sense of the tale for the viewer.

Brian De Palma's *Raising Cain* is an intricate puzzle, a heady brew of multiple personalities and multiple perspectives vetting a story of American masculinity in crisis, of a director's film career in crisis, even. Fortunately, De Palma provides viewers all the clues necessary

to pick the film's lock. The keys to the mystery involve cinematic antecedents from Powell and Hitchcock, the grammar of film language and even the specifics of the director's own canon. And that's why *Raising Cain* is no mere retread, but De Palma's valedictory psychological thriller. It's his zenith in this genre form.

Indeed, in *Raising Cain*, the son's audacity outstrips the father's. Like Margo rising triumphantly above Jenny, De Palma rises above his inspirations and homage. Sometimes failure frees the soul to take chances without the burden of expectations. And that's what happens here. *Raising Cain* is no simple De Palma house of mirrors, but a go-for-broke thriller that challenges you to determine what is real, what is imagined, and who—in fact—is doing the imagining.

***The Resurrected* * * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jane Sibbett (Claire Ward); Chris Sarandon (Charles Ward/Curwen); John Terry (John March); Robert Romanus (Lonnie); Laurie Brisco (Holly Tender); Ken Camroux (Captain Ben Szander); Patrick Pon (Raymond); Bernard Coffling (Dr. Waite); J.B. Bivens (Station Orderly); Robert Sidley (Third Orderly); Eric Newton (Lucius Fenner); Tom Shorthouse (Gas Man); Jim Smith (Butcher); Judith Maxie (Lyman); Charles Kristian (Ezra Ward). Paul Jarrett (Town Father); Joan O'Donohue (Mrs. Bishop); Serge Horde (Physician); Deborah Hope (News Anchor); Deep Roy (Main Monster); Keith Hay (Pitman); Greg Allen (Pitman 2); Todd Masters (Male Nurse).

CREW: Scotti Bros. Pictures Presents a Borde/ Raich Production of a Dan O'Bannon Film. *CASTING:* Fiona Jackson, Penny Ellers. *Executive Producer:* Tony Scott, Tom Bradshaw. *Production Designer:* Brent Thomas. *Music:* Richard Band. *Director of Photography:* Irv Goodnoff. *Special Visual Effects:* Todd Masters. *Film Editor:* Russell Livingstone. *Written by:* Brent V. Friedman. *Inspired by:* *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* by H.P. Lovecraft. *Produced by:* Mark Brode, Kenneth Raich. *Directed by:* Dan O'Bannon. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 108 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Providence, Rhode Island, Claire Ward (Sibbett) hires private detective John March (Terry) to investigate her estranged husband, Charles (Sarandon), who has been discovered by police with

some very unusual contraband: human remains. March digs into the mystery and learns that Ward has been investigating his family history, particularly the history of a local sorcerer wizard, Curwen (Sarandon), who may have discovered the secret of bringing the dead back to life. As the investigation deepens, Claire and March discover that Charles, in fact, was killed by Curwen, his doppelganger, and that the evil sorcerer now plans to continue his experiments and retain his immortality. A grim consequence of eternal life, however, is the need to feed on living human tissue...

COMMENTARY: Written in early 1927 (and published in 1941), *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* by H.P. Lovecraft concerns the strange and macabre secrets behind human immortality and includes the author's first notation of the Cthulhu mythos. The tale is set in Providence, Rhode Island, and inspired by local events, particularly those at a reputedly haunted house on Prospect Street. The bulk of the novel involves Dr. Marinus Willett's attempt to learn the reason behind the insanity of a man named Charles Dexter Ward. What the good doctor ultimately learns is that Ward has been replaced by an evil ancestor, a necromancer named Joseph Curwen. Like Stoker's *Dracula*, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* is an epistolary novel, comprised largely of correspondences and other documentation.

Dan O'Bannon's screen adaptation of *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, flatly titled *The Resurrected*, dispenses with the character of Willett and transforms Lovecraft's tale into a horror film noir, a detective story in the mold of *Angel Heart* (1987), *Servants of Twilight* (1992), and Clive Barker's superior *Lord of Illusions* (1995). Specifically, *The Resurrected* involves the investigation by private dick John March (Terry) into Charles Dexter Ward's odd behavior. The "case" is essentially the same as in the written work, involving the raising of the dead and Charles' replacement by a sinister double, Curwen, but the framing story is entirely different.

So in a sense, yes, *The Resurrected* is faithful to H.P. Lovecraft's story, but in another sense it's quite different. In those differences, perhaps, rests the film's biggest drawbacks. The movie's lead protagonist of detective John March is not at all intrinsic to the tale and boasts no real connection to it. He is not a physician who happens upon the case, and there is, frankly, no reason that Claire (Sibbett) couldn't investigate the case herself, without a detective. March never develops a romantic relationship, or even much of an attraction with Claire either, so the story just doesn't involve him on any human, personal level. John Terry sleepwalks through the role of March, projecting boredom with the whole enterprise.

But the detective story creates another problem: it distances the viewer from the predicament of Chris Sarandon's more interesting character, Charles Ward. His wife reveals his change in behavior to March via flashbacks, but the "real" Charles Ward, before his obsession, is never really known to the audience. The reason for his obsession with ancestors is similarly glossed over. And when he's gone, replaced by the evil Curwen, it doesn't feel like such a tremendous loss ... and it should. The movie does not even provide a final scene for Claire in which she can mourn the death of her husband, or at least satisfy herself with the death of his murderer. Instead, March offs Curwen, and the movie ends, without any resolution of what should be an emotional drama.

Director O'Bannon doesn't help himself, either, with the film's slow pace, and the lengthy running time. The story feels padded instead of punchy, and the film never builds up any energy until the 82-minute point, when March, Claire and an assistant detective, Lonnie, descend beneath Curwen's farmhouse and find a series of tunnels and pits. They discover a library and the grisly results of Curwen's experiments. They venture into a dark tunnel, spy a pit filled with hungry "resurrected" abominations, and then face off against another one in near total darkness, with only the light of one measly matchstick to guide them. This sequence is quite strong, boosted by violence, gore, monster attacks and the horror of a pitch-black subterranean hell.

Diffidently-performed and lacking intimacy, *The Resurrected* is a noble attempt to bring H.P. Lovecraft to the screen, but for the most part, it lacks both guts and a beating heart. This should be the tale of a woman who loses her husband to a sick obsession and an evil replacement, but the noir detective stuff is weak and removes audience identification from the story's central ideas. *The Resurrected* also glosses over the idea, present in the novel, that Curwen—a man out of time—cannot hide for long because he doesn't understand the modern world. Sarandon's character begins to speak in "antiquated language," but that's not exactly the same thing.

Dan O'Bannon, who passed away in 2009, directed one of the truly great horror movies of the 1980s, the punk/nihilist *Return of the Living Dead* (1985). So the overall flatness and lassitude of *The Resurrected* is doubly disappointing. It doesn't just let down Lovecraft fans, it lets down O'Bannon fans.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Peter Riegert (Detective Fanducci); Joan Severance (Marla Stewart); William Hickey (Lars Hagstrom); Tim Ryan (Sam Stewart); Chris Young (Jacob); Alexander Godunov (The Clockmaker); Mitchell Laurance (Martin Almquist); Lawrence Tierney (Chief Richardson); Dawan Scott (Fenrir); David Hotton (Ask Franag); Evita Shickel (Angela); Bill Kalmenson (Lester); Arthur Malet (Stoddard); John Hobson (Marotta); Greg Wrangler (Bob).

CREW: A Hyperion Films/Signature Communications Production. *Casting:* Kevin Alber, Jon Robert Samsel. *Executive Producers:* Peter E. Strauss, Frank Giustra. *Music:* David Newman. *Costume Designer:* Terry Dresbach. *Director of Photography:* Misha Suslov. *Production Designer:* Jon Gary Steele. *Film Editor:* Lynn Sutherland. *Special Effects Make-up:* Lance Anderson. *Based on the novel by:* Mark E. Rogers. *Written by:* Willard Carroll. *Produced by:* Harry E. Gould, Jr., Thomas L. Wilhite. *Directed by:* Willard Carroll. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 105 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Pennsylvania, a large runestone is discovered by Martin Almquist (Laurance). His old flame, Marla (Severance), and her husband, Sam (Ryan), come to Manhattan so Sam can decipher the sixth-century Norse inscriptions on the imposing artifact. Before long, however, a monstrous and murderous mythological creature, Fenrir (Scott), has appeared as well and begins to kill off the Watchmen, a cabal of old men who have been waiting for the creature's arrival, and the onset of a Norse "mini-apocalypse" called Ragnarok. One of the watchmen's grandsons, Jacob (Young), is actually a being chosen to stop Fenrir, along with the mysterious Clockmaker (Gudonov), really the mythical Fenrirslayer, Tyr.

COMMENTARY: It's not every day that ancient Norse mythology gets a work-out in a horror film, but that's exactly what happens in the promising but ultimately unsatisfying film *The Runestone*. As one character in the film states, "every dogma must have its day."

A millennial and apocalyptic story, *The Runestone* suggests that mankind stands at the precipice of an event called Ragnarok, a connected series of natural disasters that will culminate with flooding and the total submersion of the world in water. The film also re-tells the incidents of the 13th century epic, *Poetic Edda*, especially the events surrounding a battle between a wolf monster, Fenrir, and the courageous warrior Tyr, who loses a hand before vanquishing the beast.

In terms of "runestone" history, there is actually a real runestone from A.D. 940 called "Thorwald's Cross" that depicts this epic mythology and the monstrous Fenrir. *The Runestone* adheres quite faithfully to details of Norse mythology, and this material sets an interesting backdrop for the personal story of a woman torn between two men, one (Martin) who has a fully-expressed "dark side" and one, her husband, Sam, who controls his. Martin ultimately provides the material from which Fenrir is re-created, whereas Sam is involved in defeating the creature.

Like many 1990s horrors, *The Runestone* also posits the idea of a secret conspiracy of men, though in this case, the "Watchmen" are warriors for good, a cabal of "men with knowledge that small minds rejected," according to old Lars Hagstrom, played by the late William Hickey. When the runestone is discovered underground in Pennsylvania, Lars and his brother are all over the discovery, realizing that the battle of Ragnarok is nearing. Lars' nephew, Jacob, at first rejects his role in the conflict as simply a "nightmare" but comes to accept his destiny. Meanwhile, Alexander Gudonov plays Tyr, who is biding his time in a clock-shop until Fenrir re-appears.

The Runestone boasts an amazing, A-movie score by composer David Newman, and the music is so good it almost makes up for the movie's big flaw: a terrible central monster. Fenrir is a man in a rubber suit, with deep-set eyes in what is clearly a mask. The monster looks egregiously fake. At first, director Carroll does a fine job showing only quick cuts of the monster, or depicting it in silhouette (or its shadow), but by the mid-point of the film and a set-piece involving an attack on an art gallery, nothing is left to the imagination. In one unconvincing shot, the so-called "monster" Fenrir even manages to deliver a very human seeming punch to a victim.

Other special effects in the film also seem antiquated, especially in the era of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and *Jurassic Park* (1993). The effects consist mostly of old-fashioned double exposures for superimposition. Still, weak effects need not necessarily be a disqualifier in terms of a movie's quality if other elements are particularly strong. In this case, the aforementioned soundtrack fits the bill, but it's pretty much alone in that regard. The film's pacing is slow, Gudonov appears to be acting in his own, different movie, and there's a cringe-worthy transition part-way through the film. Specifically, a shadowy Fenrir claw eclipses a full-moon in one shot. An instant later, the silhouette of Marla's head, gyrating during sex with Sam, replaces it. The idea is certainly a visual reflection of the love triangle between Martin (now Fenrir) and Marla and Sam, but it is awkwardly rendered and poorly orchestrated.

The Runestone is also mired in the familiar format of the police procedural, which gives the movie a sense of sameness. There's even a wrongheaded superior in the department, played by Laurence Tierney.

Still, every now and then *The Runestone* brightens up with a moment of original and very wicked humor. During the aforementioned gallery attack, for instance, a performance artist is seen behind a glass partition, dressed as a middle-class homemaker ... standing at an ironing board and doing chores. Wealthy, indulged patrons watch this woman go about her mundane domestic tasks, and she is wearing giant slippers and curlers in her hair. Then Fenfir suddenly breaks into the gallery and brutally rips the homemaker apart in plain view. But it's all mistaken for performance art.

"What do you think it means?" asks one of the patrons.

"House work kills," replies another. In the same scene, one of the art-lovers also notes, after juicy blood splatter hits the wall, that the violence looked very "realistic."

The problem with *The Runestone* is that the same observation could never be made about the movie's central monster. Fenfir projects no sense of being anything other than a man in a suit and underwhelms at every turn.

Ragnarok? This guy couldn't bring about Y2K.

***Single White Female* * * * ***

Critical Reception

"... offers the good, sneaky fun of watching two attractive stars mask flimsy roles with their dueling styles."—John Powers, *New York Magazine*, August 31, 1992

"... the apotheosis of the female doppelganger narrative."—Catherine Spencer. *Fashioning Gothic Bodies*, Manchester University Press, 2004, page 131

"Though lacking the stylish trappings of a *Fatal Attraction*, or even that film's narrative strengths, it is Leigh's and Fonda's strong performances which slightly elevate this tale above the ordinary."—David Bleiler, *The Video and DVD Guide, 2004: The Discerning Film Lover's Guide*, TLA Publications, 2003, page 554

CAST: Bridget Fonda (Allison Jones); Jennifer Jason Leigh (Hedra Carlson); Steven Weber (Sam Rawson); Peter Friedman (Graham Noxon); Stephen Tobolowsky (Mitchell Myerson); Frances Bay (Elderly Neighbor); Michele Farr (Myerson's Assistant); Tara Karsian (Mannish Applicant); Christian Capetillo (Exotic Applicant); Jessica Lindy (Talkative Applicant); Rene Estevez (Perfect Applicant); Ken Tobey (Desk Clerk); Kim Sykes (TV Reporter).

CREW: Columbia Pictures presents a film by Barbet Schroeder. *Casting:* Howard Feuer. *Music:* Howard Shore. *Film Editor:* Lee Percey. *Production Designer:* Milene Canonero. *Director of Photography:* Luciano Tovoli. *Based on the novel* Single White Female *Seeking Same by:* John Lutz. *Written by:* Don Roos. *Produced and directed by:* Barbet Schroeder. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 108 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After Allie (Fonda) finds her boy -friend, Sam (Weber), cheating on her with his exwife, she kicks him out of her large Manhattan apartment and puts an ad in the newspaper seeking a roommate. She gets more than she bargained for out of Hedra (Leigh), a needy, passive-aggressive roommate who insinuates herself into every aspect of Allie's life. When Allie reconciles with Sam and tries to get Hedra out of the apartment, there's hell to pay for all involved.

COMMENTARY: *Single White Female* is a great psychological horror film and perhaps one of the very best of the "interloper" breed. As is the case in many films of this type, the film's protagonist actually lowers barriers of privacy and intimacy herself, to let in an individual who is a dangerous, unstable personality. Then, once into this "new" life, the interloper simply will not let go. Inevitably, conflict and murder result.

Allie, played by Bridget Fonda, is a gorgeous, trendy Manhattanite and entrepreneur, one who is starting up a "web site" business in the fashion industry. After she catches her boyfriend, Sam (Weber), cheating with his ex-wife, Allie seeks a compatible roommate to share expenses with. The film cuts to an amusing montage of prospective roommates during this passage. Each one is a variation of weird or creepy, either over-sharing or not self-aware enough. What Allie seeks, she believes, is someone like herself, and the movie "expresses the longing for sameness that characterizes both urban and sexual paranoia."35

Ultimately, Allie settles on physically diminutive Hedra (Jennifer Jason Leigh) who is, at least outwardly, no challenge at all to Allie's

sense of self, being both less beautiful and appearing less self-confident. But spiritually, perhaps, Hedra is tougher than Allie recognizes. She doesn't let men trample her and aggressively comes to Allie's defense over Sam and a sexually harassing boss, Myerson (Tobolowsky).

Allie gladly accepts Hedra's help in these situations, thus inviting her step-by-step into her private life in a way she does not view as threatening, at least initially. More than many "victims" in the interloper horror film, Allie seems to beckon the terror. She secretly watches Hedra masturbating in the tub, for instance, a clear-cut invasion of Hedra's personal space and roommate boundaries. She also tries on Hedra's earrings without permission, another transgression. Perhaps most significantly, Allie opens up to her new roommate, almost immediately, about her problematic relationship with Sam. Hedra quite rationally sees this as a warning sign. "I don't want to move in and catch you on the rebound," she notes, but Allie assures her the relationship with Sam is over. Which it is not. Allie just doesn't know herself very well, and she considers everybody else a distant second when deciding a course of action. The movie suggests that this is so because Allie, unlike Hedra, is an only child.

Allie welcomes Hedra into her life, but then, when *she* decides it is too much, wants Hedra to step back. And Hedra puts up with a lot too: Allie is a real moody prima donna, one who wants Hedra to be the second banana, the sidekick and the less-attractive friend who is always there for her when she needs her. But Allie rarely seems to express interest over Hedra's emotional needs. Allie doesn't want a roommate, she wants a doormat, a reflection perhaps of the way that she fears men view her.

As the movie quickly points out, Hedra, of course, is more than merely "shy" or "insecure." Although she has no problem confronting men ("Men are pigs," she says, "I don't care how nice they seem,") she feels less attractive and less worthy of attention than the gorgeous, statuesque, redhaired paragon of 1990s feminism, Allie. Accordingly, Hedra begins to re-shape herself in Allie's image, adopting her haircut and recreating her wardrobe. Many critics have seen this central relationship of *Single White Female* as intensely homo erotic and that's true, but Hedra's ultimate mission is not strictly a lesbian one: to possess Allie sexually.

Rather *she wants to be Allie*. Hedra wants to replace her roommate totally, absorbing Allie's strengths into her own twisted personality. At first she defends Allie from those who would hurt her, but before long she is going out into the world *as* Allie, even engaging in sex with Sam. She likes how it feels to be someone else.

Single White Female suggests that Hedra's psychosis is not entirely unlike Norman Bates' brand of insanity. When she was nine, her twin drowned at a family picnic, and she lost the most important relationship in her life. Hedra "should" have been a twin, she tells the only child Allie, and the implication is that she is still seeking that "other half " that will complete her, psychically speaking.

To express Hedra's longing for completeness, director Schroeder "visually externalizes Hedy's mission through numerous mirror shots."³⁶ In this regard, *Single White Female* commences with sepia-tone footage of twin girls, Hedra and her doomed sister, caring for each other then gazing into a mirror together. Later, Allie and Hedra stand before a mirror together in a shot deliberately echoing that opening composition.

Finally, Hedra ends up shattering her own reflection in a mirror during the film's violent climax, a notation that her search for completeness has turned disastrous. She cannot be whole without her doppelganger, either her twin or Allie. The final vision of a photograph that is half Allie/half Hedra is an ironic punctuation. Hedra may have failed in her quest to become Allie, but now Allie will always carry the memory of Hedra, the terror of Hedra, with her. In a way, they have become joined.

Many film critics rejected *Single White Female* because they felt it was actually an indictment of lesbians, another film (in the same spirit of *Basic Instinct*, they claimed) that depicts a gay woman as insane. Authors Peter Lehman and William Luhr write:

Although the film may seem modern in its depiction of non-marital sex, it implies that the woman's decision that she does not need a man in her life and her replacement of him by close bond with another woman is dangerous. Here, the mother/whore dichotomy is replaced by a new dichotomy: good girl (heterosexual female in a monogamous relationship)/bad girl (mentally unstable/implicitly lesbian).³⁷

This analysis represents a more narrow reading of *Single White Female* than is actually necessary. For instance, it is not Allie's choice to replace a man and bond with a woman that is considered dangerous by the filmmakers. It is her neurotic, self-centered desire to be the center of the universe that interacts with Hedra's obsession, finding personal completion in the absence of the twin who died.

This is a co-dependent relationship, pure and simple, and Allie is the one who lowers barriers of privacy and personal space first, even

after Hedra has warned her that she doesn't want to be a temporary fix for Allie's man problems. But Allie does exactly what she wants to do. She brings in a roommate when she needs one. She invades Hedra's personal space (the bathtub, the earrings), and she discards Hedra when she ping-pongs back to Sam.

This isn't a comment on "evil lesbians," but rather how some people, like Allie, are playing with fire when they bring a stranger—of any sex, really—into their personal lives, and then don't respect that stranger. Hedra turns out to be a bad, psychotic roommate, of course, but Allie's actions go a long way towards encouraging her worst behaviors. It isn't as simple as a good girl/bad girl dynamic, or as positive heterosexual/negative homosexual mirror images. Rather, the story is about lowering defenses, about Allie's need to be the dominant person in any relationship and her inability to see how this trait affects her unstable roommate.

In keeping with the interloper format, Hedra begins her campaign of terror by degrees. After, as in the case of the vampire of myth, being "invited in" to Allie's life, Hedra keeps over-stepping. She wears Allie's clothes, she kills the ad-hoc family's pet (a dog), she takes out the "minority" friend, who sees through her masquerade of sanity (in this case, a gay man), then escalates to murdering the boyfriend, Sam. Finally, Hedra goes ballistic and the film reaches an apex of violence, suspense and confrontation.

The thing that makes *Single White Female* such an excellent example of the interloper format is the movie's expression of its core theme, the idea of letting someone scary into your private life, with no real polite way of removing them. By mid film, Allie just wants Hedra gone but can't get rid of her. "I can change," Hedra pleads at one point.

But she can't. She wants to dominate and become Allie, whom she sees as "so fucking weak."

That is not, entirely, an untrue assessment. And *Single White Female* thrills and terrifies because it understands the core of the interloper dynamic: that it takes two to tango. All the terror arises not just because Hedra is a dangerous, murderous wacko, but because Allie opened the door for her in the first place. Not out of some desire to bond with a woman instead of a man that the filmmakers perceive as "bad," but because she wanted an adoring, subservient, fawning friend in her presence. Allie's vanity is the issue.

Hedra isn't the only one playing to the mirror.

Sleepwalkers * .

Critical Reception

"... barely average Halloween fare. What saves it is the above-average cast.... [E]arly on, this small-screen-friendly ensemble brings fresh blood to a stale idea."— Michael Sauter, *Entertainment Weekly*, "Video: In Short," October 30, 1992, page 90

Cast and Crew

CAST: Brian Krause (Charles Brady); Madchen Amick (Tanya Robertson); Alice Krige (Mary Brady); Jim Haynie (Ira); Cindy Pickett (Mrs. Robertson); Ron Perlman (Captain Soames); Lyman Ward (Mr. Robertson); Dan Martin (Andy Simpson); Glenn Shadig (Mr. Fallows); Mark Hamill (Lt. Jennings); Cynthia Garrix (Laurie); Stephen King (Cemetery Caretaker); Forensic Technicians (Clive Barker, Tobe Hooper); Lab Technicians (John Landis, Joe Dante).

CREW: Columbia Pictures presents an Ion Pictures, Victor Grais Production. *Casting:* Wendy Kurtzman, Lisa Mionie. *Music:* Nicholas Pike. *Executive Producer:* Dimitri Logothetis, Joseph Medawar. *Film Editor:* Nicholas Brown. *Production Designer:* John De Cuir. *Director of Photography:* Rodney Charters. *Written by:* Stephen King. *Produced by:* Mark Victor, Michael Grais, Nabeel Zahid. *Directed by:* Mick Garris. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

INCANTATION: "That's the great saving grace about this movie, that it's so tongue-in-cheek. I liked that element of wry humour. I mean, you obviously don't kill someone with a corn on the cob! King had embedded this humour into the script and Mick obviously managed to pull it out."³⁸—Alice Krige, discussing *Sleepwalkers*.

SYNOPSIS: A mother (Krige) and son (Krause) team of fugitive shape-shifters called "Sleepwalkers" arrive in Travis, Indiana, in search of human virgins whom they can consume. If they don't feed on human virgins soon, they'll starve. The boy, Charles, latches onto a student in his high school, Tanya (Amick), as his latest target, but in a scuffle at local Homeland Cemetery, she proves quite resourceful and escapes. Meanwhile, Clovis, the cat belonging to a murdered police officer, stalks the Sleepwalkers with other tabbies, attempting to bring the

reign of terror to an end.

COMMENTARY: *Sleepwalkers* is really two movies. The first is an involving, serious horror picture about the plight of scorned outsiders: the shape-shifting sleepwalkers who exist on the periphery of human civilization ... and who are starving to death.

The second story is a jokey freak show, filled with campy cameos from famous horror movie figures like Clive Barker, Joe Dante, John Landis, Tobe Hooper, Stephen King, and Ron Perlman and utterly risible death scenes that foster laughter and derision from audiences. In one such case, a corn cob becomes a deadly weapon.

The first of these two films is actually pretty good. Brian Krause and Alice Krige create creepy, inhuman characters that elicit compassion and sympathy. Krause's character, Charles, writes an original story in his high school creative writing class, one about what it's like to be alone, an outsider, to be chased. He is a serious, tragic figure, especially since his lot in life is one of unwanted responsibility. Apparently only male sleepwalkers can feed on human purity, meaning that males must then share that "meal" with females of the species ... which involves sexual intercourse.

So Charles must bring home supper for his mother, the sultry Krige. Because of Sleepwalker nature, the human relationship of mother and son has been perverted into that of caretaker and dependent—that of lovers. Alice Krige is perfect for the part of Mrs. Brady, a slightly-bonkers, cooped-up, reclusive Tennessee Williams heroine by way of Stephen King. She is tragic, sad, needy ... and, clearly ... monstrous. "I need it, and you have to get it for me," she pressures Charles about her hunger, bringing shame and guilt into the equation as only a mother can.

Early in *Sleepwalkers*, director Garris establishes the Bradys' unusual lifestyle remarkably well. Charles listens to old tunes ("Sleepwalk") on his record player, dances romantically with his mother in a dark living room, and then goes upstairs to physically ... uh ... mingle with his gorgeous, hungry Mom.

Later, Garris stages a shot from a high angle of the mother and son in bed together, indulging in sweaty, passionate sex. Incest, of course, is a longstanding screen taboo (see: *Demon Possessed* [1993]), but there are hints here of an alien morality system. These are not human beings. These are Sleepwalkers. And we learn that these two are the "last of their kind," doing what they feel they must to survive. "I have to feed you," Charles insists, and the pressure he feels in this matter is palpable.

The mother-son intimacy and the increasingly desperate murders make these monsters seem—in the best tradition of the genre—utterly tragic ... and in some ways, even human. Charles appears sensitive, sincere and likeable, but bound and determined to care for his "family," and crazy Mrs. Brady just seems lost and vulnerable ... a rapidly-wilting hothouse flower. She's not quite sitting around waiting for gentleman callers, perhaps, but still, she's recognizable. And who can blame her for that obsession with cats, anyway? For a cat's scratch is fatal to her kind.

This intriguing set-up, however, lasts only for twenty minutes or so.

When Garris's film settles down at Homeland Cemetery to dramatize Charles' attack on Tanya, all sense of reality, of humanity, is scooped from the movie like so much kitty litter. Although the movie could have depicted Charles experiencing a crisis of morality over his duty and responsibility (the murder of an innocent human girl), or even depicted him deciding that he couldn't go through with it, the film takes the easy, cheap way out instead. Charles attacks Tanya without remorse and the thoughtful young man audiences had grown to know and like (despite the whole troubling incest thing) disappears from the film entirely. Instead, Charles turns into a quipping, joking, heavily-made up Freddy Krueger surrogate. One who jokes about "sucking face."

Then Charles sticks a pencil in a policeman's ear (a ridiculous moment punctuated by the boy's reference to a "cop-kebab") and gets into a wrestling match with an egregiously fake-looking cat. Characters are suddenly introduced for no rhyme or reason, like Ron Perlman's Captain Soames. Before long, Mommy Brady is out of the house to avenge her wounded son, throwing Tanya's parents through the windows and murdering the police chief with that ear of corn, burying it like a dagger in his upper back. She quips that if he doesn't eat his vegetables, he isn't entitled to dessert.

So ... a corn cob as a lethal implement? Does anyone believe for a second that if you smashed a corn cob into somebody's back it would actually penetrate their flesh? Wouldn't it just sort of crumble and get crushed on impact? Sleepwalkers can be as strong as Hercules, but they can't change the consistency of matter not their own, so far as the movie asserts. A corn cob is not a shiv.

The whole last half of the film is ludicrous like that. We get the horror celebrity cameos. We get excessively-rubbery Sleepwalkers make-up. We get police cars blown-up with single pistol shots. We get fake-looking animatronic cats. We get Tanya partially soul-sucked

again and again, but never apparently wanting for any of the missing parts. It's utter nonsense, and a complete betrayal of the film's first half.

It would have almost been better if Garriss had made an entirely bad movie, because then audiences wouldn't be so disappointed with the lapses in tone and lack of narrative closure. Instead, the first half of the movie sets up promises that the last half can't, or just won't, deliver.

Krige is sensational and sensual in the film. Krause does a good job too. And all their hard work goes right down the toilet. This could have been a great horror film about what it means to be alone, separated from your kind. It could have been about real desperation, and the moral compromises that go with it. It could have been about family in an entirely creepy way.

But nah, it's all just a bad joke. Of all the Stephen King movies of the 1990s, *Sleepwalkers* may just be the worst.

At least until *The Mangler*.

Split Second * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Rutger Hauer (Detective Harley Stone); Kim Cattrall (Michelle); Neil Duncan (Detective Dick Durkin); Alun Armstrong (Thrasher); Michael J. Pollard (The Rat Catcher); Ian Dury (Jay Jay); Pete Postelthwaite (Paulsen); Roberta Evans (Robin); Steven Hartley (Father); Sara Stockbridge (Tiffany); Colin Skeaping (Drunk); Ken Bones (Forensic Expert); Dave Duffy (Barman); Stewart Harvey-Wilson (Killer); John Bennett (Dr. Schulman); Chris Chappel (Rat Catcher Assistant).

CREW: Interstar, Muse Productions B.V. and Chris Hanley Present a Challenge Film. *Production Designer:* Chris Edwards. *Director of Photography:* Clive Tickner. *Costume Designer:* Antoinette Gregory. *Film Editor:* Dan Rae. *Music:* Stephen Parsons, Francis Haines. *Executive Producer:* Keith Cavele. *Written by:* Gary Scott Thompson. *Produced by:* Laura Gregory. *Directed by:* Tony Maylam. *Train Station and Additional scenes directed by:* Ian Sharp. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.



A monster serial killer is loose in global-warming decimated London of 2008, and these guys, Rutger Hauer (left) and Neil Duncan (right), must stop it in *Split Second* (1992).

INCANTATION: "Stone is the John Wayne of the future. Trouble is, he's out of fashion ... I love the hero and the anti-hero who lives in the same body. It makes him more human."³⁹—Rutger Hauer discusses his character in the futurist horror film, *Split Second*

SYNOPSIS: In the year 2008, London survives the fallout of global warming and after 40 days and 40 nights of torrential rain is virtually submerged. A paranoid, loose cannon cop, Harley Stone (Hauer) and his new, buttoned-down partner, Dick Durkin (Duncan), hunt a vicious serial killer who rips out the hearts of his victims and killed Harley's former partner, Foster. A fusion of a human and a supernatural being, the monster seems to be setting a trap for Stone and uses Michelle (Cattrall) Stone's girlfriend and Foster's wife to bring him down to a flooded train station.

COMMENTARY: *Split Second* is another of the 1990s' weird, supernatural serial killer movies: a police procedural and a horror movie all at the same time. It's something along the lines of *The First Power* (1990) or *Fallen* (1998), only this time out the serial killer is a monster infused with Satanic power and the movie is set in the far-flung year of 2008, when all of London is a flood zone because of the ravages of global warming. A radio broadcast featured early in *Split*

Second comments on the fact that the United States has blocked another U.N. resolution against global warming, and that, at least, is an accurate prediction of the year 2008 and the second Bush Administration's stance on "climate change."

The global warming background adds a bit of welcome ambience to *Split Second*, since it means all the actors are constantly walking through a few feet of murky water. Other than that, however, every line in the film, every character in the film, is a cliché.

Hauer plays the Schwarzenegger-esque action hero, first depicted in silhouette, wearing sun-glasses, smoking a cigar, and carrying a very large gun slung over one shoulder. He skirts police rules, of course, and suffers from trauma in the past: the death of his partner. When he sleeps, he sometimes dreams (in black and white) about Foster's demise in the sewers. Also, Stone boasts a specific connection to the killer: the beast's work won't be done until he has taken Stone's heart.



Michelle (Kim Cattrall) and detective Harley Stone (Rutger Hauer) find love in the shadow of the monster in *Split Second*.

Meanwhile, Stone insists that he works "alone" and is saddled with a strait-laced partner, Durkin, who is a total by-the-book kind of expert on serial killers and the supernatural. As the movie progresses, Durkin loosens up in a comical way and starts asking for "big fuckin' guns." Meanwhile, the wrong-headed superior at the police station dresses them both down, and Stone must deal with a rival at the station too, here played by Postlethwaite.

All of this is extremely familiar stuff, and the killer who takes "hearts" so as to gain the victims' DNA, soul and power, looks extra-terrestrial but is apparently a demon, not entirely like the baddies of the two films I mentioned above, *The First Power* and *Fallen*. Also from the serial killer paradigm we get the kidnapped loved one (here a girlfriend, played by Cattrall) and the message or clue scrawled in blood. In this case, that message is "I'm back."

Split Second is totally over-the-top and often silly but crushingly derivative in its narrative and approach. You've seen this story a million times before: fallen cop versus serial killer, with a supernatural twist. If the film had an excess of style, or some sense of pace, the derivative nature of the narrative might not be disconcerting. But the pace is leaden, and none of the fights or action sequences create much impact or punch. The final chase in the subway is noisy and explosive, but dull.

Of all the performers, only Cattrall seems capable of any subtlety. Her Michelle seems like a real person, despite the odd scenarios she's placed in. Duncan and Hauer play their more substantial parts "big," almost as parody of the form, but this approach is not consistent. The movie can't decide if it wants to be tongue-in-cheek camped-up horror film or serious scary movie and that hurts it. The fact that two directors—Ian Sharp and Tom Maylam—are credited here probably doesn't help the situation.

Cult movie fans have taken up the cause of *Split Second*, asking critics what else they could have expected from a big action movie about Rutger Hauer fighting a Satanic, alien serial killer. My answer: a degree of freshness in the writing and some sense of involvement in the proceedings on the part of the director.

***Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* * * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Sheryl Lee (Laura Palmer); Ray Wise (Leland Palmer); Madchen Amick (Shelly Johnson); Dana Ashbrook (Bobby Briggs); Phoebe Augustine (Ronette Pulaski); David Bowie (Phillip Jeffries); Eric Da Re (Leo Johnson); Miguel Ferrer (Albert); Pamela Gidley (Teresa Banks); Heather Graham (Annie Blackburn); Chris Isaak (Special Agent Chet Desmond); Moira Kelly (Donna Hayward); Peggy Lipton (Norma Jennings); David Lynch (Cordon Cole); James Marshall

(James Hurley); Jurgen Prochnow (Woodsman); Harry Dean Stanton (Carl Rodd); Kiefer Sutherland (Sam Stanley); Lenny Von Dohlen (Harold Smith); Grace Zabriskie (Sarah Palmer); Kyle MacLachlan (Dale Cooper); Catherine Coulson (Log Lady); Walter Olkewicz (Jacques); Michael Anderson (The Man From Another Place).

CREW: New Line Cinema presents a David Lynch film. *Casting:* Johanna Ray. *Music:* Angelo Badalamenti. *Production Designer:* Patricia Norris. *Film Editor:* Mary Sweeney. *Director of Photography:* Ron Garcia. *Executive Producer:* Mark Frost, David Lynch. *Produced by:* Greg Fienberg. *Directed by:* David Lynch. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 135 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The FBI investigates the murder of a young girl, Teresa Banks (Gidley). Meanwhile, in the Pacific Northwestern town of Twin Peaks, Laura Palmer (Lee) goes through a series of strange encounters in the days leading up to her murder by the same, secret assailant.

COMMENTARY: *Fire Walk with Me* is a disquieting exhumation of the "underneath" in America. In the film, we encounter homecoming queen and Twin Peaks resident Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee) and follow her through her harrowing last week on this mortal coil. We see that this "typical" teenager is anything but.

If the movie feels like a case of cocaine-induced paranoia (as one critic asserted), that is likely intentional because Laura is indeed experiencing a cocaine-induced paranoia throughout much of the movie. She's a junkie, and the film depicts Laura snorting coke on several occasions, as well as participating in a drug deal gone wrong. Thus the film's lurid, jittery, unpleasant shape perfectly reflects the piece's content. We seem to be viewing the film from inside a drug fever.

David Lynch's films work on different metaphorical levels, and one thematic level of *Fire Walk with Me* involves a truly unpleasant topic: incest. Beautiful Laura Palmer—the envy of every girl at Twin Peaks high school—is the victim of incest. She has been the victim of sexual molestation by her father, Leland Palmer (Ray Wise), for several years. Unable to cope with this monstrous reality, Laura's shattered mind has come to visually reinterpret her father's nocturnal bedroom visits as the home invasions of a swarthy stranger, a monster named "Bob." Either that, or Bob is a real demon, a creature from another world called "The Black Lodge."

Laura informs her friend Harold that "Bob is real. He's been having me since I was twelve." Furthermore, she notes, "he comes through my window at night ... he's getting to know me. He wants to

be me ... or he'll kill me." And sure enough, one day, Laura arrives home from school early and sees Bob prowling around in her bedroom, as if sniffing her out. It's a terrifying scene as the audience suddenly registers the unexpected intruder in a place of safety and comfort, and almost physically blanches at his presence. Scared, Laura runs out of the house, terrified, only to see not the Evil Bob emerge after her ... but rather her beloved father, Leland. He is the Monster from her id.

In another disturbing scene, Bob slips inside the Palmer house through Laura's window at night. In electric blue moonlight, he seduces her. In the throes of their mutual passion, Laura suddenly sees that the stranger is actually her father, Leland, and nearly goes mad at the revelation. Again, this is the thing she is trying to bury under mountains of cocaine and alcohol—the betrayal by a trusted loved one.

How does the typical victim deal with persistent sexual abuse and incest? According to many authorities, the victim engages in alcoholism, drug use, prostitution and worse. Consider these factors in relationship to Laura Palmer. We already know she is addicted to cocaine. We already know she drinks. But Laura is also sexually involved with at least two boyfriends at school: the temperamental Bobby (Dana Ashbrook) and James Dean-ish James Hurley (James Marshall). She seems to ping-pong back and forth between them. And, as prescribed above, prostitution is part of Laura's life too. We learn in *Fire Walk with Me* that (as in the series before) Laura has been selling her body both at One Eyed Jacks and at the film's sleazy Bang Bang Bar.

In other words, a history and pattern of incest leads to self-destructive behavior on the part of the victim. It leads to the destruction of—and disassociation from—the healthy ego. This is also evident in *Fire Walk with Me*. "Your Laura disappeared," Laura informs James blankly, feeling unworthy and undeserved of his authentic, romantic love. "It's just me now," she explains, feeling ashamed and guilty over her behavior.

At one point, late in the film, even Laura's guardian angel seems to abandon her, vanishing from a painting in her bedroom. It's thus clear that Laura blames herself for her father's behavior, and consequently that she views herself as ugly and corrupted. She isn't the golden girl anymore, she's tarnished. This self-hatred becomes plain during the moment when Laura confides in Harold about "Bob's" visits. Suddenly, the film cuts to a nightmarish view of Laura as an ivory white crone, one with alabaster skin, yellowed teeth, scarlet gums and blackened lips. She looks like a terrible, corrupted monster:

an outward reflection of her low self-esteem. This is how she sees herself.

Later in the film, we see Leland Palmer—suffering his own personal hell of guilt and shame—imagining himself in identical terms, right down to the black lips. This is the form of the bad conscience made manifest.

Those who endure incest and sexual abuse also, over time, may experience night terrors, hallucinations or insomnia. Laura is not immune from these symptoms either. She lives through terrifying nightmares, especially ones that involve a creepy painting. On that painting is rendered a half-open door, and in Laura's dream she mindlessly treads though that door into the evil world of the Black Lodge, a place where "garmonbozia" (pain and suffering) is eaten like creamed corn, and her suffering will provide a feast. She is, literally, the Devil's candy. And she knows it.

Laura is aware that she is a moth driven to the flame (a woman consigned to Hell) and again and again, *Fire Walk with Me* brings up the idea of fire in connection to Laura. Donna Hayward (Moirra Kelly) asks Laura a weird question. "If you fall in outer space, do you think you'd slow down after a while, or go faster and faster?" Laura's telling answer is that she would go faster and faster ... without knowing it, and then spontaneously burn up. No angels could save her ... because they're all gone. The world is devoid of angels.

Again, this answer appears to be a metaphor for Laura's increasingly "fast" life (a life made even more jittery and fast by the cocaine): dating two boys; scoring drugs; acting as a prostitute ... trying desperately to escape her real life and the sexual abuse. In the end, however, no matter how fast she goes, Laura will still be consumed by flame. The Log Lady (Catherine E. Coulson) tells Laura—in an important, if brief, scene—that "when this kind of fire starts, it is very hard to put out. The tender boughs of innocence burn first, and the wind rises, and then all goodness is in jeopardy."

Once more, you've got to contextualize this remark in terms of the incest: the act which has made the self-loathing Laura transform from golden girl to promiscuous drug abuser and prostitute. In the execution of that bad behavior, the first victim is Laura's innocence ... her childhood. The second is her goodness (and now she can't even volunteer to feed the hungry in the meals on wheels program). The third victim is existence itself. Laura understands this. She realizes she is headed "nowhere ... fast."

Another frequent quality of incest victims is a protective impulse; an overriding desire to save or rescue younger siblings from the life-

destroying behavior that has ruined them. In *Fire Walk with Me*, Donna goes to the Bang Bang Bar with Laura. Donna drinks alcohol, takes drugs, and seduces a john. When Laura witnesses Donna's craven behavior—the tender boughs of innocence about to burn—she is roused to act. Unable to save herself, Laura does the next best thing: she rescues naive Donna. Afterwards, Laura warns Donna cryptically, "don't wear my stuff," an indication that Donna has "tried on" Laura's lifestyle. But it doesn't fit Donna, and Laura doesn't want Donna to be like her.

A central question regarding *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* involves the rogue's gallery in the Black Lodge. This gallery includes Bob, the backwards- talking Man from Another Place (Michael Anderson) and the One-Armed Man. They dwell in that eternal sitting room, the velvet-lined room with zig-zag floor. Are they real or imaginary? Are they sentient, or symbolic? Is Leland an all-too-"human" sexual abuser? Or is he an unlucky man possessed by an evil spirit? Who do we blame for the incest: the spirit (Bob) or the body (Leland)?

In a sense, it is immaterial. When criminals commit terrible acts, they often claim the "devil made them do it," right? *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* may suggest a universe of Hell (in the form of the Black Lodge) and Heaven too (in the form of Ronette Pulaski's and Laura's individual guardian angels), but it never suggests that Leland is innocent. There may be a "monster" cowering inside him, but there is a monster cowering inside all abusers, isn't there? If evil dwells in the human psyche, then it dwells in the human psyche ... and we must combat it. Leland never does that. He murders Teresa Banks and eventually he murders his own daughter, Laura, because he is so consumed of "the evil spirit." That's what makes him a villain.

Encoded in *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* is a commentary on David Lynch's approach to symbolic storytelling. Early in the film, FBI agent Sam Stanley (Kiefer Sutherland) and Agent Chester Desmond (Chris Isaak) are tasked by Lynch's deaf FBI chief with the investigation of Teresa's murder. After briefing them in very general terms, Lynch's character then maddeningly introduces the two agents to "Lil," a woman in a red dress wearing a blue rose. He says, in essence, that she represents the case that the men have embarked upon. Then, in a bewildering moment, the strange Lil dances up to the two agents, grimaces—revealing a sour face—and makes a fist.

Then, Lil is never seen or heard from again as a living, breathing, human character. But soon after this scene, Desmond and Stanley interpret her presence. They analyze her facial expressions. They note the color of her dress. They register the presence of the blue rose, and

ponder the meaning of her balled fist. On one hand, this is Lynch's oddball humor, acknowledging the *Twin Peaks*' aficionado's propensity for analyzing every little thing.

But in another sense, Lil—and Desmond's explanation of Lil—is the audience's primer to successfully reading or interpreting the figurations of this movie. Following Desmond's example, the viewer is meant to weigh characters and events symbolically. We are supposed to "see" Bob as Laura's "safe" interpretation of her father's criminal, unacceptable behavior. We are supposed to understand the drug use and prostitution as a victim's escape from guilt and shame. Even the passing of Theresa's ring we are to comprehend as a legacy of death, carried from one victim to the next. And the creamed corn? Human pain and suffering as the food of the gods.

Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me is really The Tragedy of Laura Palmer and the Tragedy of Small Town America. The golden girl—the cheerleader beloved by all—is actually a secret victim of sexual abuse ... and no one sees it. Or no one cares to see it. This is the roiling "underneath" that Lynch so frequently exposes in his films, and it was never more relevant, perhaps, than in the early 1990s when this film was made. These were the early years after the notorious 1989 Glen Ridge rape case (wherein popular football jocks raped a retarded girl with a baseball bat and broom); these were the years of the Spur Posse. Suburbia's shameful secrets were spilling out into the tabloid culture in creamed-corn torrents.

Perhaps an entire American generation of teenagers was actually fire walking with us, possessed by darkest impulses. What remains profound about Laura Palmer's tragedy today is that, in the end, David Lynch grants the character a small measure of contentment. The guardian angel she believed she lost during her last, brutal hours on Earth returns anew in the afterlife to heal her pain, even as good Dale Cooper lands a comforting, supportive arm on her shoulder. Our last view of the cheerleader is of Laura smiling. In life, Laura was relentlessly victimized, her goodness burned away by life's ugliness. In death's sitting room, of all places, peace is finally at hand.

Although this may seem decidedly bleak, it is also Lynch's balancing of the spiritual world. It may be a place of garmonbozia—death and suffering—but it isn't populated merely by the likes of Bob and the Man from Another Place. The winged celestial being is there too, the seraph, and that means that forgiveness is at hand. *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* isn't misanthropic: in Laura Palmer, there's sympathy for the victim of abuse. Even in Leland Palmer, there's sympathy for the devil. If we do "live in a dream," as one character suggests in the film, then it is also up to us to shape that dream, and

always keep Bob at bay.

***Waxwork II: Lost in Time* * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Zach Galligan (Mark Loftmore); Monika Schnarre (Sarah Brightman); Bruce Campbell (John Loftmore); Marina Sirtis (Gloria); Martin Kamp (Baron Von Frankenstein); Michael Des Barres (George); Jim Metzler (Roger); Sophie Ward (Elenore); Billy Kane (Nigel); Joe Baker (The Peasant); Juliet Mills (The Defense Lawyer); John Ireland (King Arthur); Patrick Macnee (Sir Wilfred); David Carradine (The Beggar); George Buck Flower (Sarah's Stepfather); Drew Barrymore (Victim #1); Alexander Gudonov (Scarabis); Jack Eiseman (Cabbie); Buckley Norris (Judge); Elisha Shapiro (Felix); Stefanos Miltaskakis (Frankenstein's Monster); Maxwell Caulfield (Mickey); Kate Murtagh (Matron); Erin Gourlay (Ghost Girl).

CREW: Artisan Entertainment and Electric Pictures present an Anthony Hickox film. *Casting:* Caro Jones, Jack Jones. *Film Editor:* Christopher Cibelli. *Music:* Steve Schiff. *Special Make-up and Effects:* Bob Keen. *Production Designer:* Steve Hardie. *Director of Photography:* Gerry Lively. *Costume Designer:* Mark Bridges. *Executive Producer:* Mario Stoela. *Produced by:* Nancy Paloian. *Written and directed by:* Anthony Hickox. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 104 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Mark (Galligan) and Sarah (Schnarre) escape from the cursed Waxwork after a great battle, but a devilish severed hand follows them home and murders Sarah's alcoholic stepfather (Flower). With Sarah on trial, Mark attempts to prove his girlfriend's innocence. He does so by traveling through time doors and attempting to bring back evidence of the supernatural world. Separated in time, Mark and Sarah each deal with strange, evil worlds in the past and the far-flung future.

COMMENTARY: The original *Waxwork* (1988) was a welcome surprise: a humble and incredibly fun horror film. Through cursed wax-figure dio ramas, Hickox's film escorted viewers through the history of the genre, recreating famous sequences and moments with classic, much-beloved "monsters." Although the format of the film was far-fetched—suggesting that Dracula and The Mummy were actually historical figures—*Waxwork* nonetheless evidenced some charming

characterizations and a nice sense of tongue-in-cheek lightness or playfulness. In short, it was an unexpectedly enjoyable romp.

The sequel, *Waxwork II: Lost in Time*, lacks even the modest pleasures of its predecessor. It's an overstuffed disaster of a sequel and one inordinately pleased with itself to boot. The central problem, besides the recasting of Deborah Foreman's character Sarah by the less-impressive Monika Schnarre, is that the sequel accents comedy, instead of following the example of the original, which let the viewer find the comedy in the horror scenes. Humor was featured as a kind of grace note. Here, director Hickox launches into the slapstick full bore, and it just doesn't work.

The Frankenstein sequence is one notable example. It starts out regal and sedate. But then the monster pops out Dr. Frankenstein's eyeballs, and afterwards, a brain even pops out of its skull and flies across the room, chasing Mark. The previous moments establishing the Victor Frankenstein sequence don't support the sudden shift into such Sam Raimi-esque humor.

The same problem recurs in the beautifully visualized *The Haunting* riff. The settings and costumes are perfect. The casting is terrific too, with Marina Sirtis as the quasi-Lesbian Theo from Robert Wise's masterpiece. But then the sequence descends to mere buffoonery with Bruce Campbell forced to deal with a fake-looking, exposed rib cage. Salt and vinegar just happen to get thrown over his open wounds, and it's not only ridiculous, it's staggeringly unfunny, even in the hands of a comedic master like Bruce Campbell.

The *Alien* riff in the film, which is jarringly inter-cut with the classic *Haunting* visuals, also more accurately looks like a Roger Corman version of *Alien*— not Ridley Scott's film. And what time period is this supposed to be occurring in?

And that's one of the enormous problems with *Waxwork II*. The plot is just a hook for Mark and Sarah to skip through various movie scenes. Some of those movie scenes are fun (like the *Dawn of the Dead* riff with Mark in a John Travolta *Saturday Night Live*- style white jacket) but what is the audience to make of the *Godzilla* riff, which features bad dubbing?

Is this funny? Perhaps on first blush, but the problem is that all these worlds are supposed to be historical or future time periods. While I will give the movie the leeway of suggesting an alternate universe in which *Godzilla* stomps Tokyo, tell me in what alternate world "dubbing" exists as a spoken language? So that people's words don't match their lips? See, it just doesn't make sense on the literal level first.

In the last half of *Waxwork II*, the movie also settles down into a world of deadly dull medieval fantasy with characters like King Arthur and Gudonov's lackluster villain, Scarabis. There are duels, tragic separations, more sword duels, and absolutely nothing to hold the interest of the committed horror fan.

More and more, this movie reminds me of the *Cannonball Run* movies of the 1980s. Here, famous genre actors like David Carradine, Bruce Campbell, Drew Barrymore, and Marina Sirtis show up to party, do a scene between meals, and then leave the movie. Everyone's just doing a cameo with no regard to anything else, especially the overall narrative. All the set-pieces are just halfthought-out sketches. There's nothing to hold *Waxwork II* together, and so, by the end, the movie descends into chaotic incoherency. The celebratory rap tune at the end is just the nail in the coffin.

January 20:

Bill Clinton is inaugurated as the 42nd president of the United States.

February 26:

The World Trade Center bombing occurs in Manhattan, killing six Americans and injuring more than a thousand. The car bomb is the work of a conspiracy of Islamic radicals, including Ramzi Yousef, financed by Khalid Shaikh Mohammed.

February 28:

A 51-day stand-off commences between religious fanatics and Federal authorities in Waco, Texas, at the Branch-Davidian compound of cult leader David Koresh.

April 19:

The Waco stand-off ends in conflagration, and with the death of David Koresh and seventy-five others, including several children. The incident is seen by rightwing forces as a symbol of overreaching big government.

April 30:

Tennis star Monica Seles is stabbed by an obsessed fan of her competitor, Steffi Graf, in Hamburg.

June 23:

In Manassas, Virginia, Lorena Bobbitt cuts off the penis of her husband, John Wayne Bobbitt, following an alleged marital rape. A sufferer of clinical depression, Lorena afterwards is found not guilty

of this particular crime by reason of insanity. His penis recovered and re-attached after a nine-hour surgery, John Bobbitt later becomes a porno actor and stars in Frankenpenis (1996). The incident enters the pop-culture for a time, with so-called "Bobbittmania" spurring dirty jokes and mentions in songs, television and late night jokes.

July 19:

President Clinton announces "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," a policy which permits homosexual service members to remain in service ... so long as they don't bring up their orientation.

July 20:

White House Counsel Vince Foster commits suicide. He leaves behind a note about his displeasure with Washington, D.C., where "ruining people is considered sport." Foster's death immediately becomes fodder for the extreme right wing, and conspiracy theorists accuse the Clintons of everything from a cover-up to murder.

October 3, 4:

Black Hawk Down. Eighteen American soldiers are murdered in a pitched battle with Somali forces in the city of Mogadishu. Images of dead American soldiers dragged through city streets are played on CNN, enraging Americans of all stripes. By March 15, President Clinton removes all U.S. peacekeepers from Somalia (a mission instigated by his predecessor, George Bush).

Nov 17–22:

Congress passes the controversial North American Free Trade Agreement, an act which eliminates trading barriers throughout the continent. Vice-President Al Gore and United We Stand spokesperson Ross Perot debate NAFTA on CNN, and Al Gore (who was pro-NAFTA) is widely seen as the winner, though Ross Perot's prediction that "the giant sucking sound" the nation would soon hear would be the sound of American jobs moving South of the Border proved correct. Regardless, the House passes NAFTA 234–200, and the Senate passes it 61–38.

The first-person shooter video game Doom is released by id software. The violent imagery of the game proves controversial, but the game also becomes enormously popular, spawning several sequels and even earning the title of best video game of all time.

***Amityville: A New Generation* * . (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Ross Partridge (Keyes Terry); Julia Nickson-Soul (Suki); Lala Sloatman (Llanie); Jack R. Orend (Franklin Bronner); David Naughton (Dick); Barbara Howard (Jane Cutler); Richard Roundtree (Pauli); Terry O'Quinn (Detective Clark); Robert Rusler (Ray); Lin Shaye (Nurse Turner); Karl Johnson (Café Owner); Ralph Ahn (Mr. Kim); Tom Wright (Morgue Attendant); Bob Jennings (Rookie Cop); Jon Steuer (Young Keyes); Claudia Gold (Keyes' Mother); Bob Harvey (Orderly); Ken Bolognese (Critic); Abbe Rowlins (Academic); Joseph Schuster (Young Man).

CREW: *Casting:* Annette Benson, Harriet Greenspan. *Co-Producer:* John G. Jones. *Music:* Daniel Licht. *Film Editor:* Rick Finney. *Production Designer:* Sherman Williams. *Director of Photography:* Wally Pfister. *Executive Producer:* Steve White, Barry Bernardi. *Written by:* Christopher DeFaria, Antonio Toro. *Produced by:* Christopher DeFaria. *Directed by:* John Murlowski. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A hobo, Franklin Bronner (Orend), presents an aspiring photographer, Keyes (Partridge), with an evil mirror—a relic from the Amityville haunted house in Long Island. Before long, the mirror is responsible for murdering another tenant in Keyes' apartment, the painter Suki (Nickson-Soul) and also her angry boyfriend, Ray (Rusler). Detective Clark (O'Quinn) investigates the murders and comes to realize that Keyes is Bronner's long-lost son and that Bronner murdered the rest of his family years earlier in the Amityville house. Keyes attempts to exorcise the demonic mirror from his mind with an unusual gallery presentation of performance art.

COMMENTARY: Another haunted antique from Long Island vexes dull-witted victims in this straight-to-video, low-budget effort, *Amityville: A New Generation*. Here, the antique in question is an evil mirror, and it ends up in an apartment building inhabited entirely by pretentious artists. One artist, named Suki (Julia Nickson-Soul), gets the Megan Ward mirror disease from *It's About a Time* and experiences a bout of onscreen horniness with landlord David Naughton. Afterwards, she hangs herself, and you can't blame her, at least not if you've seen *Makin' It*.

For artist Terry Keyes (Partridge), the evil mirror frees some repressed memories. He learns that he once lived at the notorious Amityville house as a child, and that his entire family was murdered there at dinner-time by his insane father, Bronner (Orend).

Perhaps the best scene in the film finds Terry becoming his father and experiencing a vision (in a mirror) of his time inside an old insane asylum, "before Reagan cut the budget for mental hospitals." The scene is vetted in true 1980s, rubber-reality style and well-visualized. The journey into this nether realm makes Terry wonder if he is a chipoff-the-old block and will pick up his Dad's murderous behavior too. The film's climax involves Terry, seemingly possessed, picking-up a shotgun and moving to kill all his friends, who are reliving the dinner table massacre of his youth in a performance art exhibit he has staged for the apartment.

Instead of murdering his friends, however, Terry blows up the mirror at the last minute, and the shotgun blast is mistaken for art by the audience. By the way, that's something that will never happen to *Amityville: A New Generation*. It's as dull and predictable as the previous entry in the series, and even less intriguing, since there's not even a subplot here about family disintegration, in the tradition of the franchise.

"Amityville, it's in your blood," declares one character in producer' DeFaria's *A New Generation*.

He wishes.

Carnosaur *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Diane Ladd (Dr. Jane Tiptree); Raphael Sbarge (Doc); Jennifer Runyon (Thrush); Harrison Page (Sheriff Fowler); Ned Bellamy (Fallon); Clint Howard (Friar); Frank Novak (Jesse Paloma); Ed Williams (Dr. Ravon); Andrew Magarian (Swanson); Brett Hinkley (Peregrine); Lisa Moncure (Mallard).

CREW: Roger Corman Presents an Adam Simon film. *Production Designer:* Aaron Osborne. *Music:* Nigel Holton. *Special Make-up and Creature Effects:* John Buechler and Magical Media Industries, Inc. *Visual Effects Supervisors:* Alan Lasky. *Director of Photography:* Keith Holland. *Based upon the novel by:* Harry Adam Knight, *and the treatment by:* John Brosnan. *Film Editor:* Richard Gentner. *Executive Producer:* Roger Corman. *Produced by:* Mike Elliott. *Written for the Screen and Directed by:* Adam Simon. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 83 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Nevada, Dr. Jane Tiptree's (Ladd) secret experiments have created a new breed of murderous dinosaurs. Meanwhile, a manmade "fever" spreads through the local populace and has deleterious effects on the women. Tiptree has engineered a virus which impregnates healthy human women and forces them to give live birth to dinosaurs. This is the scientists' way of giving the planet back to its true masters.

COMMENTARY: *Carnosaur* features a terrific final shot. The protagonist's home has been invaded by Federal agents and a pop-culture poster on the wall goes up in flames. On that poster is *Mad Magazine's* Alfred E. Newman, flashing that famous, "what me worry?" grin.

It's a perfect note to go out on, especially for a movie concerning a manmade apocalypse.

The world is going to Hell, the government can't stop it, and our last visual in the film is this snarky sort of look at man's willful ignorance about bad times. It's a good metaphor for much of the 1990s.

What me worry?

That Osama bin Laden has declared war on the United States? That the Glass-Steagall Act, limiting the abilities of banks to gamble, has been repealed? That energy de-regulation has given way to capricious giants like Enron? That the dot-com bubble might burst?

Nah.

One just wishes that the preceding eighty-or-so minutes of *Carnosaur* were as strong as that blazing final image. Instead, this Adam Simon film meanders through its plot, touching on corporate greed at Eunice Corp. (also seen in *Brain Dead*), science run amok (as created by Diane Lane's mad scientist), government conspiracies, and other common touchstones of the decade.

Featuring threadbare sets and a virtually incoherent script, about the only thing *Carnosaur* has going for it is a series of vicious, blood-soaked dinosaur attacks. In the most memorable of these, several drunken teens get mauled by a small dinosaur in their car. The scene is shot as a vicious, messy frenzy and hits just the right note of anarchy and animal savagery. It's not something you see so vividly in *Jurassic Park*, the film's intended competitor.

And did I mention that a dinosaur decapitates Clint Howard? *Good times...*

But the plot, about a scientist who decides that humans shouldn't control the Earth and decides to give it back to the dinosaurs, is odd to say the least. The sight of women giving live birth to dinosaurs must also go down as among the weirdest images of the 1990s, but in *Carnosaur*, it's just one bizarre moment amongst many as the movie tries to find some plot-line to hold onto.

Carnosaur is often laborious and dull, featuring seemingly interminable conversations in the Eunice boardroom. When the big action scenes arrive and we see the dinosaurs outside of the quick cuts, they are disappointing. They look like angry, barely mobile muppets.

Still, the movie features one legitimately funny remark. Upon learning of the rebirth of the dinosaurs on "dinosaur highway," one character notes that "it would make a great theme park."

That's a funny reference to *Jurassic Park*, but also an indication that *Carnosaur* was hoping to corner the market on dinosaur action in the early 1990s. Unfortunately, it's such a lousy, confusing film that it renders itself, if not extinct, then at least obsolete.

***Children of the Corn II: The Final Sacrifice* ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Terence Knox (John Garrett); Paul Scherrer (Danny

Garrett); Ryan Bollman (Micah); Christie Clark (Lacey); Rosalind Allen (Angela); Ned Romero (Reid); Bob Harvey (Reporter); Ed Grady (Dr. Richard Appleby); John Bennes (the Reverend Hollings); Wallace Merck (Sheriff Blaine); Joe Inscoe (David Simpson); Kelly Bennett (Mary Simpson); Rob Treveiler (Wayde McKenzie); Leon Pridgeon (Bobbie Knite); Marty Terry (Mrs. Burke/Mrs. West); Ted Travelstead (Mordechai); Sean Bridgers (Jedediah); Aubrey Dollar (Naomi Johnson); Kristy Angell (Ruth Gordon); David Haines (Jake Fraser); Bill Wagner (Bingo Caller).

CREW: Dimension Films Presents a Fifth Avenue Entertainment, Stone Starley Production of a David F. Price Film. *Casting:* Geno Havens. *Special Effects Make-up:* Bob Keen. *Production Designer:* Greg Mettoni. *Music:* Daniel Licht. *Director of Photography:* Levie Isaacks. *Film Editor:* Barry Zetlin. *Executive Producer:* Lawrence Mortorff. *Written by:* A.L. Katz and Gilbert Adler. *Based on* Children of the Corn *by:* Stephen King. *Produced by:* Scott A. Stone and David G. Stanley. *Directed by:* David F. Price. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A tabloid writer for *The World Enquirer*, John Garrett, and his estranged teenage son, Dan (Scherrer), stop in Gatlin shortly after the massacre of all the adults in town by the local corn-obsessed children. A boy staying at the "Come Sleep with Me" Bed and Breakfast with them, Micah (Bollman), is soon transformed into a new cult leader by He Who Walks Behind the Rows, a "God" seeking vengeance against those who have poisoned the Earth. While John looks into a town-wide conspiracy involving corn crops, Danny falls for a local teen, Lacey (Clark), whom Micah plans to use against him on the night of the harvest moon.

COMMENTARY: It's not entirely clear, objectively speaking, why 1984's *Children of the Corn* has inspired a whopping five sequels and a remake in 2009. The original film was mediocre at best, yet today it looks like Shakespeare compared to most of what's followed since.

Alas, 1993's *Final Sacrifice* is no exception, and actually, it's the beginning of a race to bottom. In this first sequel, a tabloid writer played by *Tour of Duty*'s (1987–1990) Terence Knox heads to Gatlin (the site of the first movie's massacre) when he learns of the murder of all the adults there. He pauses his investigation only to make time with a foxy bed and breakfast owner played by Rosalind Allen. Meanwhile, his teenage son listens in and smiles outside the bedroom door where they have sexual intercourse. Yuck. Too much

information, Dad.

Another particularly weird scene sets off much of the action in *Children of the Corn II*. Normal but kinda Goth teenager Micah (Bollman) inexplicably falls into some kind of "corn" vortex or whirlpool in the local cornfield. This vortex is entirely computer-generated, not unlike the famous *Doctor Who* time warp tunnel in that series' opening credits. While free-floating through infinity Micah seems to pixelize down into individual cells. He then reforms—at the cellular level—as an agent of absolute evil, and the vortex spits him back up.

The effects themselves are terrible in this sequence, resembling *The Lawnmower Man's* (1992) virtual reality world more than anything else. But in that film, the horror was technological in nature, so the computerized effects fit the movie's content. Here, such unnatural visuals stick out like a sore thumb. One wonders why the screenwriters (or the director) simply didn't have Micah swallowed by the Earth, and then belched out, without the intervening Pac-Man-style effects. That would have preserved some mystery, anyway.

That's not the only strange scene in this poor sequel either. A little old lady, Mrs. Burke, is crushed under her own house by the evil children. The farmhouse is up on jacks (she's moving out of town because of those darn kids), and slowly, the jacks begin to contract with the old lady trapped beneath. Yet, amazingly, she never aligns herself parallel with the slowly-lowering floor joists, an act which would have saved her from being crushed, at least in the short term (or until authorities could arrive).

And that scene's got nothing on the moment during which the old woman's wheel-chair-bound sister, also played by Marty Berry, is struck by a truck (again the doing of the evil children!), and her body is sent careening through a storefront window into a bingo parlor. After her body lands amidst the broken glass a local man stands up and yells "Bingo!"

Now, to read that description, it kind of sounds funny, but overall this is such a humorless horror movie that, again, the scene sticks out like a sore thumb. It's tonally out of tune with every other aspect of the film.

Children of the Corn II also seems to have a difficult time staying on track with its plotline. At one point, Knox's character, along with a Native American local, discovers that the corn crop from Gatlin is contaminated and likely spreading mind-altering contamination across the whole county. In fact, the very kind of toxin present could well account for hallucinations, especially among the young. Well, bingo

indeed—this looks exactly to be what has occurred to Gatlin's children.

But no, that can't be! We already know that Micah got sucked down the corn hole (pardon my French) and re-formed by the computerized He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

Oh, and He Who Walks Behind the Rows is here retconned and established as an Indian God who once also punished a tribe in the area of Gatlin because the parents were ... lazy. This Native American ancestry gives the film it's ridiculous, baffling coda, which features Indian Frank Redbear (Ned Romero) as a smiling, beatific ghost, visiting a rock in which the legend of H.W.W.B.T.R. has been painted for the ages ... though promptly forgotten by the time of the next sequel.

Children of the Corn II has enough problem establishing a sense of reality without adding ghosts into the equation, believe me. The ending comes out of left field, not the cornfield.

The Crush * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Cary Elwes (Nick Eliot); Jennifer Rubin (Amy); Kurtwood Smith (Nick Forrester); Amber Benson (Cheyenne); Gwyneth Walsh (Liv Forrester); Alicia Silverstone (Adrian Forrester).

CREW: Warner Bros. presents a Morgan Creek and James G. Robinson film. *Casting:* Maci Liroff. *Music:* Graeme Revell. *Film Editor:* Ian Crafford. *Production Designer:* Michael Bolton. *Director of Photography:* Bruce Surtees. *Executive Producer:* Gary Barber. *Produced by:* James G. Robinson. *Written and directed by:* Alan Shapiro. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An aspiring reporter, Nick (Elwes), moves into the guest house of an affluent white family, the Forresters. The family's fourteen-year-old daughter, Adrian (Silverstone), develops a crush on Nick and works her way into his job, his relationship with a fellow reporter, Amy (Rubin), and more. Adrian becomes so obsessed with Nick that she steals one of his used condoms to get a sample of his semen, and then has him arrested on charges of statutory rape.

COMMENTARY: Give interlopers an inch and they'll take a mile. That's one message of *The Crush*, the tense story of a journalist, Nick Eliot (Cary Elwes), who finds his life entangled, then nearly ruined, by a brilliant, gorgeous Lolita figure named Adrian, played with pouty, ripe sexuality by 1990s "It" girl Alicia Silverstone. The Alan Shapiro film follows the conventions of the 1990s interloper paradigm and to a large extent concerns Nick's vanity. That's his big flaw. He is so flattered by the attention of a modern-styled Dolores Haze that he very quickly lets boundaries get blurred.

Nick is an aspiring journalist hoping to work for *Pique Magazine*. His grandfather was a famous reporter, so Nick clearly feels he has a reputation to live up to. When he moves into the guest house of the Forrester family, he meets Adrian, a fourteen-year-old girl, and oh so precocious. At first, it seems harmless when she proofreads his article, and the bosses like it.

That's mistake number one.

Then, Adrian—a prodigy at the piano—confesses that she is lonely. "You don't know how hard it is for me to make friends," she says, informing Nick that she has skipped two grades. He quickly offers to be her friend and takes her on a romantic drive in his souped-up classic car, a Valiant. Then she kisses him, and only at that point does Nick mildly apply the brakes. "Now wait a minute," protests, but again, it's pretty clear that he's flattered, not repulsed by the attentions of a brilliant, beautiful young woman who, presaging Monica Lewinsky, looks awfully good smoking a cigar.

Then Nick makes a real transgression. He goes into the Forrester house uninvited for a look around. He ends up hiding in Adrian's closet as she returns from the shower. He watches as the nude girl faces him, knowing he's there. A moment later, after Adrian is gone, he emerges from the closet, sweating profusely. Later, Adrian asks "did you like it?" and "Ever do it with a virgin?"

By this point, Nick has hung himself by his own petard and failed to follow his girlfriend's sage advice. "You have to be the adult," Amy informs him. "You can't blur the line."

That's exactly what Nick has done, blurred the line, and though he is hardly guilty of a crime, his behavior encourages Adrian in her delusions that he loves her. She then stages a wasp attack on Amy (and the movie makes note that both wasps and Adrian are "territorial"). And as Nick continues to spurn her advances, Adrian raises the stakes.

She not only puts Amy in a hospital, she vandalizes Nick's Valiant, scratching the word "cocksucker" on it. Then she sabotages Nick on the job, blanking out a disc and cassette tape containing Nick's important interview. Finally, in the *coup de grâce*, Adrian plucks one of Nick's used condoms from the trash, puts his semen inside her, and makes it look like Nick beat her and raped her. This sensational scene is all played out at a benefit staged by the magazine editor, and Nick is arrested for the assault of a minor.

Nick showed poor judgment in his dealings with Adrian and nearly loses everything: his job, his freedom, his girlfriend, even his prized classic car. This is the essence of the fear stoked by the interloper film: of a person "getting in" to your life and playing havoc with it. A door to intimacy was mistakenly opened a crack and now the interloper kicks it all the way open, paving the way for public humiliation and suffering.

The Crush plays on a very substantial and pervasive male fear. Specifically, that a man will not be able to control his sexual desires and urges with a young, attractive, willing woman, otherwise known as jailbait. *The Crush* lingers lovingly on a sequence involving Adrian sunbathing in her skimpy bikini. She luxuriates below Nick's window, and the film shows every desirable inch of the adolescent's well-developed physique. Adrian certainly looks like an adult, yet she is still a minor, and *The Crush* looks at the way that some men are unable to distinguish the line of appropriate behavior in this situation.

Adrian is a walking, talking trap for Nick. She might as well be a Succubus luring Nick to damnation. She is also a problematic influence for her father, who seems to worry the most about her journey into adulthood. He calls Adrian "a very special girl," and seeks to infantilize his daughter. Dad's special project in the attic is a childish merry-go-round for Adrian, an amusement she has clearly outgrown.

Yet *The Crush* contextualizes its story about a girl's sexuality mainly through the eyes of these two men. Nick knows he shouldn't "go there" to use a silly 1990s expression, and Dad (Kurtwood Smith) ignores his daughter's burgeoning maturity and attempts to keep her, locked in the attic, forever a child.

The Crush alludes not merely to Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 *Lolita* in its central scenario, but also, textually, to Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. There, another adult renter like Nick, named Lockwood, came into a house filled with secrets.

The lead female in that story, Catherine, ultimately had to choose which of two men to marry, Heathcliff or Linton. In *The Crush*, Adrian

is an English "whiz" who says she loves Brontë's book; it's her favorite. Perhaps that's because Adrian sees clearly what her two choices are: either remain a child in Dad's world, or move forward into the world of sexual relationships with Nick.

He is not the first man Adrian has had a hopeless crush on, and one might perceive this fact as Adrian's urgent need to escape the rigid patriarchy of her affluent, middle-class household. Smarter, more developed than her peers (remember, she skipped two grades), Adrian is ready to grow up, even if the culture still deems her a kid. The movie's final battle, not coincidentally, occurs on Dad's merry-go-round. Dad is locked out, but Nick is tied and bound to the amusement park ride. This is Adrian's ultimate solution: bringing a would-be lover into her still childish, still immature world, a world represented by the merry-go-round.

The Crush is a hair-raising, throat-tightening thriller, with the vicissitudes of adolescent sexuality at its core. Like Adrian herself, one of the decade's signature interlopers, the movie is a lot smarter, a lot more cunning than it needed be.

The Dark Half * * *

Critical Reception

"Slack, derivative Stephen King movie.... Unfortunately, this actor [Timothy Hutton] lacks the sadistic intensity to play a true, lusty demon."—Owen Gleiberman, *Entertainment Weekly*, "Movies: Now Playing," May 14, 1993, page 40

"George A. Romero delivers one of his most mature works with a fine performance by Timothy Hutton. Romero working inside the studios makes you wonder what kind of difficulties went on behind the scenes and if nothing more, this slick, polished film is probably the least Romero-esque of all of his films. George showed he could play by the rules here, but perhaps we don't go to George A. Romero for a filmmaker playing by the rules. It's easy to forget this is a Romero film—perhaps that's why it wasn't a bigger hit."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"A somewhat forgettable King adaptation from George Romero. Could've been so much more given the collaborators,

but Romero seems uncomfortable with such a mainstream, studio project, which clearly was not what he wanted to be working on. A fine King novel, this one deserves a re-adaptation."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Timothy Hutton (Thad Beaumont); Amy Madigan (Elizabeth Beaumont); Julie Harris (Reggie Delesseps); Robert Joy (Fred Clawson); Chelsea Field (Mrs. Pangborn); Michael Rooker (Alan Pangborn); Royal Dano (Digger Holt); Rutanya Aldo (Miriam Cowley); Beth Grant (Shayla); Glenn Colerider (Homer Gamache); Tom Mar - dirosian (Rick Cowley).

CREW: An Orion Pictures Release. A Film by George Romero. *Casting:* Terry Liebling. *Makeup Effects:* John Vulich, Everett Burrell. *Costume Designer:* Barbara Anderson. *Production Designer:* Cletus Anderson. *Music:* Christopher Young. *Film Editor:* Pasquale Buba. *Director of Photography:* Tony Pierce Roberto. *Executive Producer:* George A. Romero. *Produced by:* Declan Baldwin. *Based on the book by:* Stephen King. *Written and directed by:* George Romero.

SYNOPSIS: When threatened with extortion over his *nom de plume*, author Thad Beaumont decides to out himself as George Stark, the best-selling author of violent, pulpy novels. Beaumont is featured in a story for *People* magazine which "kills" his literary alter-ego. But soon, Thad comes to regret offing his "dark half," especially since a murderer claiming to be George himself seems determined to avenge his untimely death.

COMMENTARY: In some important ways, George Romero's troubled adaptation of the Stephen King novel *The Dark Half* seems distinctly out-of-step with the times it was created. The film moves at a slow but deliberate pace and it doesn't feature any spectacular special effects moments or gratuitous gore sequences. The almost simple-minded storyline involves an alter ego, like Jekyll-Hyde, come to life, and it's vetted with surprising, even dignified restraint.

On the other hand, *The Dark Half* gazes meaningfully at the idea of the world of fiction literally breaking into the real world, thus presaging such self-reflexive mid-decade efforts as *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994) and John Carpenter's *In the Mouth of Madness*

(1995). Romero's screenplay looks at the act of writing literally as a physical birth: as an independent creation, that, like a child, is no longer controlled by its creator.

Thad's alter-ego is George Stark, and he's a psychic manifestation of Thad's dead twin—so called "foreign matter" that showed up in his brain as a child. Once he's out there, he's out there, and Thad can do nothing to stop him.

Consciously evoking the measured, evenkeeled style of his seventies non-living dead endeavors *Jack's Wife* (1972) and Martin (1976), *The Dark Half* eschews flashy scares for a long, meticulously constructed build to terror. The only problem with that approach arrives during the film's last sequence. A perfunctory confrontation between Thad and George, set in an attic, doesn't quite warrant such preparation and escalating terror.

No doubt it's a low-key approach, one lacking the sensational aspects of, for instance, a *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992). But sometimes slow and steady is good. Sometimes a modest approach is enough. Not every horror film need throttle the audience to within an inch of its life.

And Romero proves yet again that he is a master of creating small but electric moments within his larger narrative. In the film's first scene, there's a superb jolt involving brain surgery as, suddenly, a blind, unseeing eye opens wide in the gray matter.

Another jolt involves a woman returning to her apartment, only to be grabbed by an extended hand as she opens the door. It rocks you back, superbly orchestrated.

There's also a well-drawn and lurid murder scene in a hallway, one set to garish red and blue light and visually evoking every pulpy crime novel of the 1950s.

Romero doesn't stage many of these "bumps" or set-pieces in *The Dark Half*, but each one is masterful and unimpeachable. This guy knows the tricks of the trade, but he is working to a deeper purpose than simply dumping over your popcorn.

As Professor Beaumont's college lecture mirrors, *The Dark Half* is about duality, and the movie gets some fun mileage out of the way George, Thad's alter-ego, is actually treated as a living person. "This is where George Stark came into being," Thad notes at one point, showing a visitor around his office. Even the idea to "kill" a pseudonym seems to add fuel to the fire, giving life to a personality that, by rights, should have none. And, in the spirit of *Star Trek's* "The Enemy Within," the movie even makes note that the "dark half" of our

personalities is not something it's easy to do without. "It's all me. Even the ugliness is part of me," Beaumont explains.

Obsessed with the creative act of writing, *The Dark Half* also makes some worthy insights about the art form. "The only way to do it is to do it," states Thad, and that's an axiom about writing. It's a lot of fun to talk about ideas and characters and writing books, a hell of a lot harder to sit down, focus and commit oneself to that difficult concentrated mental act of creation. It's in that very magical moment, in that mental dance of bringing something forth out of nothingness, the movie suggests, that George's psychology was born. He is "the force" of Thad's "will" made manifest. And all good writers require an iron will, or they don't write, and they don't finish what they write.

There's a certain aggression to wordsmithing, to playing God at the typewriter, word processor or computer, and *The Dark Half* suggests that what is ultimately written in that aggressive, dynamic act, comes to take on a life of its own. God knows this is true, especially in the era of the Internet. Our words are aggregated, syndicated, regurgitated, blogged, critiqued and tweeted *ad in-finitum*, far beyond the intent, imagination or aspirations of the "creator."



A portrait of horror icon George Romero, on the set of *The Dark Half* (1993), an Orion Pictures Release.

The Dark Half is not a spectacular horror film, but it is a good, artistically-crafted one. The climax is a bit of a mess, and the film resolutely does not need the off-the-mark subplot involving the Pangborns (characters who also appear in *Needful Things*). Restrained and intelligent, George Romero's film meditates on the very act of creation, and in some ways there could not be a more important topic for a horror film. Thad Beaumont, teacher of academic concepts by

day and writer of pulpy, violent melodrama by night, represents an important aspect of professional writers. Not only do most of them need a day job to pay the bills (like a teacher's post), but they have to be smart, skilled and intellectual enough to know when to drop the intellectual literary critic act, let their hair down and let instinct take over.

A contradiction—or just a keen understanding of one's own dark half.

***Demon Possessed** * **

Cast and Crew

CAST: Dawn Laurie (Jeanny); Aaron Kjenaas (Tom); Connie Snyder (Karen); David Fields (Chris); Eve Montgomery (Lissa); Jim Cagle (Ron); Bekki Ballain (Bessie); Mark Armstrong (Bar Lout); Jim Gresch (Sheriff); Barbara Claman (Older Jeanny).

CREW: AIP presents a Christopher Webster Film. *Film Editor:* Arny Sumner. *Director of Photography:* Joseph Friedman. *Executive Producers:* Barry Tucker, Alexander W. Kogan, Jr. *Music by:* John Tatgenhorst. *Written by:* Julian Weaver. *Produced and directed by:* Christopher Webster. *MPAA Rating:* NA. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of six young snowmobilers decide to race on remote Black Friar Lake, but one of the racers, Tom (Kjenaas), is badly injured during the contest. His friends, Ron (Cagle), Lissa (Montgomery), Karen (Snyder), doctor in training Chris (Fields) and his girlfriend Jeanny (Laurie) find shelter for him in an old church turned summer camp named St. Dominic. While Tom recuperates from his injuries, the others spend a worried night playing with a spirit board, the so-called "Devil's Eye." One at a time, a shadowy, monstrous force kills off the unlucky interlopers, even as Tom seems to miraculously recover.

COMMENTARY: Imagine a snowbound version of Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* (1983)—but without the skill, style and wit—and you might get a good sense of this low-budget effort, *Demon Possessed*. Like Raimi's debut film, this film from director Christopher Webster involves a

remote cabin in the woods, a group of competitive friends on vacation, and a grotesque demonic possession. What *Demon Possessed* lacks, however, is an accomplished cast, and, perhaps more importantly, any true sense of escalating terror.

Yet the film is not entirely a loss, either. As rough and unpolished as it remains, *Demon Possessed* nonetheless casts a weirdly hypnotic spell. Yes, it's an old fashioned "bad movie" (the very kind *Mystery Science Theater 3000* once made fun of on a regular basis), replete with troublesome deficits in editing, sound, performance and pacing. Yet *Demon Possessed* doesn't feel like your typical 1990s Hollywood "product" either, one extruded in an industrial process. Rather it's a legitimate throwback to low budget fare of the 1970s and 1980s. Even if that quality doesn't make the film exactly good, it's still a refreshing change of pace from the likes of *Leprechaun 3* or *Candyman 3*.

Demon Possessed's setting at lonely Black Friar Lake, described evocatively in the dialogue as "a shifting blanket of snow," proves both distinctive and isolating, an atmospheric and highlyvisual "white noise" that suggests spiritual desolation. *Demon Possessed* also makes creepy use of disturbing Christian idols, including a Christ effigy whose eyes bleed. You've probably seen such images in horror films a hundred times before even in the 1990s (and in such films as *Exorcist III* [1990]), but the fact that these strange artifacts are abandoned and forgotten here at the haunted St. Dominic Camp (motto: "Keep the Beast in the Field!") lends further weight to the undercurrent of spiritual ennui and turpitude.

These images underline the fact that the characters have reached some weird level of purgatory at the old camp. And given their combative, competitive, slick natures, perhaps that isn't entirely a surprise. Jeanny, the narrator of the story, is weak-willed and jealous, one who later confesses that she was "drawn to the Face of Evil" even when she knew it was wrong.

Her boyfriend Tom is, to put it bluntly, a self-satisfied, obnoxious jerk. And most creepily of all, he seems to boast a physical lust for his big haired sister, Karen. When Tom becomes possessed by the demon, he makes love to Jeanny, but—for a disturbing moment—imagines Jeanny (stretched out on her back) is actually a receptive Karen.

Earlier in the film we see one of Tom's hands inconspicuously slide down Karen's buttocks, and his climactic imagined sex scene with his sister is the punctuation for that development. It's weird and icky, treading in psychological terrain quite unsettling. But that's what good horror films do: they shatter taboos and make us uncomfortable

about the things polite society doesn't talk about.

Despite such nasty moments and an overall aura of dread, *Demon Possessed* still fails to deliver fear and horror on several occasions. The kills are mostly uninspired in concept and in execution. For example, Lissa dies when a ceiling fan gently lowers itself from the ceiling of a walk-in-freezer and then—starting slow—begins to whirl faster and faster until she is killed by it. Lissa stays frozen in terror instead of ducking away from the slowly-ramping up fan, and the moment doesn't work at all.

Equally lame, the young physician-in-training, Chris, dies when he ventures outside by moonlight and an ice sickle falls from a roof ... into his eyeball. Wow, that's bad luck, huh?

Even Karen's death is inglorious. She walks into a hanging hammock (in her underwear) and it becomes a sort of malevolent noose, lifting her up and strangling her in it.

These aren't the only disappointing moments either. The film provides a ridiculous and overlong climactic snowmobile chase, as well as a laughable, valedictory voice-over from Jeanny as a froggy-voiced senior citizen.

But on the other hand, there's the moment when the soundtrack inexplicably (and creepily) adopts the notes of "Three Blind Mice." Or the unsavory instance when the camera adopts the viewpoint of a prone Jeanny as a demonic Tom mounts her and makes love to her (or actually makes love to *us*, as the composition suggests).

You just wish the director had gone whole hog with his kinky, perverse side, and transformed this movie into a real personal apocalypse, one delving into dark matters of racism (Lissa is African American and is called "the black girl" early on), incest, and other moral bad behavior here on Earth. You sense that was the devil lurking in Christopher Webster, the one he wanted to express.

One last note regarding *Demon Possessed*: the VHS cover art features a photograph of a sexy blond in black lingerie coupled with the ad line: "The Fires of Hell Just Got Hotter." Neither that actress nor her sexy get-up actually appear in the film.

The Fires of Hell Just Got Disappointed.

Fire in the Sky * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: D.B. Sweeney (Travis Walton); Robert Patrick (Mike Rogers); Craig Scheffer (Allan Dallis); Peter Berg (David Whitlock); Henry Thomas (Greg Hayes); Bradley Gregg (Bobby); Noble Willingham (Sheriff Blake Davis); James Garner (Lt. Frank Waters); Georgia Emelin (Dana Rogers); Scott MacDonald (Dan Walton); Wayne Grace (Cyrus Gilson); Kenneth White (Buck).

CREW: Paramount Pictures Presents a Joe Wizan/Todd Black Production, a Robert Lieberman Film. *Casting:* Richard Pagano, Sharon Bialy, Debi Manwiller. *Music:* Mark Isham. *Co-Producers:* Tracy Torme, Robert Strauss, Nilo Rodis-Jamero. *Costume Designer:* Joe I. Tompkins. *Film Editor:* Steve Mirkovich. *Production Designer:* Laurence Bennett. *Director of Photography:* Bill Pope. *Executive Producer:* Wolfgang Glattes. *Based upon the book The Walton Experience by:* Travis Walton. *Written by:* Tracey Torme. *Produced by:* Joe Wizan, Todd Black. *Directed by:* Robert Lieberman. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 109 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On November 5, 1975, in Sitgreave National Forest in Arizona, blue-collar logger Travis Walton (Sweeney) disappears without a trace. Five friends and co-workers, including socalled "pillar of the community" Mike Rogers (Patrick), recount a harrowing tale of a flying saucer encounter. But the local authorities, including Lt. Frank Waters (Garner), immediately suspect a more earthbound solution: foul play. But then Walton miraculously returns to the small town of Snowflake after five days and reports that he has been abducted by aliens.

COMMENTARY: *Fire in the Sky* recounts the story of one of the world's most infamous alien abductions, the Travis Walton story, set in 1975. Some investigators believed Walton's incredible tale of flying saucers, alien abduction, Greys, and probing medical tests, especially since it is one of the few UFO-related stories to feature multiple eyewitnesses, and furthermore, eyewitnesses who have passed lie detector tests on more than one occasion.

Other investigators viewed the bizarre incident as a brilliantly and elaborately orchestrated hoax. The skeptics pointed to Walton's apparent involvement in a check fraud scam some years earlier, and the fact that the alien abduction drama *The UFO Incident* had aired on television shortly before his disappearance. Is that where Travis got

the idea to "stage" his own disappearance? Was this all just a scheme to hit "the big time" and make some money from the story-hungry national tabloids?

Where does the truth reside? Of course, we can never know the answer for certain, but 1993's drama *Fire in the Sky*, written by Tracy Torme and directed by Robert Lieberman, dramatizes Travis Walton's unusual story from the perspective of the men who initially reported this "close encounter."

What remains so unique about *Fire in the Sky* is that it eschews sensationalism and focuses intently on the human cost of those involved in Travis's disappearance, particularly family man Mike Rogers.

Robert Patrick ably and sympathetically portrays Rogers, and despite his second billing, *Fire in the Sky* is really his movie. We follow the agonized, haunted Rogers as he deals with his own pervasive guilt over leaving an unconscious Travis behind in a field on the night of the UFO encounter, and as he becomes a pariah in Snowflake and as his family and friends turn against him one by one. Adding insult to injury, even Travis ultimately blames Rogers for his actions on the night of November 5, without truly considering that Rogers—as leader of a logging crew—had four other men he was responsible to protect in that situation.

In terms of drama, it's illuminating to note how the UFO encounter reflects the dynamics of the already-existing friendship between Travis and Mike. (In the film) Travis daydreams of opening up a huge motorcycle dealership with Mike. He flits from one get-rich-quick scheme to the next, never landing long enough to consider reality. He speaks of romantic notions like love (for Mike's sister, Dana) yet doesn't seem tethered to any real responsibilities. Mike is the polar opposite: "grounded" by conventional concerns like mortgage, money and family. He has no time to fantasize about impossible things. He's worried about the next paycheck, the next contract ... the well being of his daughters and wife.

When the UFO spirits away Travis—whose feet are already metaphorically off-the-ground— it is again Mike who must clean up and interface with the unpleasantness of the "real world." He must contend with the responsibilities and repercussions associated with Travis's disappearance and return. Mike must be the stalwart leader of men and still, somehow, hold out hope for their joined future, so that his co-workers don't succumb to hysteria and pressure from law enforcement.

Travis's encounter with the aliens aboard their spaceship in *Fire*

in the Sky is dramatized in the film's last fifteen minutes or so, in a self-contained set-piece of sorts. The depiction of the alien ship (exterior and interior) leans heavily towards the terrifying, an interpretation which doesn't accurately reflect Walton's real-life testimony about his experience. In fact, screenwriter Torme reportedly apologized for the frightening views of the aliens in the film, noting that the "horror" aspect of the journey had been insisted upon by higher-ups in the production.

Yet, in terms of theme and narrative, the horror movie approach to the alien experience remains effective because it seems to scare Travis straight. After he returns to Earth and recovers (arriving almost as a newborn: naked and in the fetal position), he stops dreaming impossible dreams, marries Mike's sister, and commits to a stable job and the family life. He has metaphorically been "reborn."

By contrast, a shattered Mike—who has taken all the heat for Travis over his sojourn—retreats from the world entirely, at least until Travis arrives offering conciliation and forgiveness. Rogers—a meat and potatoes guy if there ever was one—has been forced to open his mind to possibilities (to dreams and fantasies?) he had never before considered, so he has become a reflection of Travis, pre-ordeal. When they resume their friendship, Mike and Travis again balance one other.

The alien abduction scene in *Fire in the Sky* is probably the scene that most viewers remember most from the film. And that's entirely understandable, as it presents the interior of the alien spaceship as a world approximating a charnel house: a dark, dank locale of enormous and inhuman suffering and pain. With vertigo-provoking photography, we travel with Travis (via flashback) inside an extra-terrestrial chamber that looks like something akin to the mad cannibal house in Tobe Hooper's seminal *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. We are even treated to a trademark Hooper shot from that film: a close-up view of a victim's eyeball, wide and almost popping with unbearable terror.

The alien spaceship set-piece begins as Travis—feeling pancake syrup fall on his face after hiding under a kitchen table—recalls a similar feeling: something moist and goopy touching his lips aboard the alien ship. He opens his eyes to find himself inside a chamber that resembles a fleshy coffin made of coruscating human fat tissue. Travis then breaks through a membrane wall only to find himself weightless inside a huge, organic chamber with alien space suits. There is a splendid jolt here involving one such space suit coming to life, unobserved, behind him. Then Travis is captured by aliens and dragged down a claustrophobic tunnel to an examining room.

The long trip to the operating theater is grotesque and horrifying. The floors are ashy—as if composed of ground-up human bone. Relics of previous experiments have been mindlessly cast off everywhere: eye glasses, boots, sneakers, etc. Then the aliens come at Travis with unclean, byzantine surgical instruments including saws, drills and needles. It's clear that these aliens—unaware or uninterested in human pain and discomfort—boast a very different concept of "hygiene" than we do. Lieberman's camera then barrels down from a high angle, right into Travis's terrified face, and it's here that we get that familiar Tobe Hooper eyeball shot.

Without hyperbole, this fifteen-minute-or-so sequence in *Fire in the Sky* is a masterpiece of production design, special effects, camera-work and editing. There is a deeply diabolical, intelligent nature to these alien invaders (they have the eyes of old men), and you never once get a sense that you are looking at animatronics, constructed sets, or special effects. On the contrary, the persistent use of the P.O.V. perspective lands us in Travis's (shaking) boots as he countenances the impossible and the terrifying.

There are aspects of *Fire in the Sky* that simply don't work, which is the reason why, I suspect, the film has not achieved much mainstream or genre critical success. The police procedural aspects of the tale (seemingly *de rigueur* in the 1990s) go nowhere and fail to resolve in any satisfactory fashion.

And, for much of the film, Travis (D.B. Sweeney) remains something of an enigma, an opaque "dreamer" but not so much an identifiable or individual personality. And I also suspect that many audience members were non-plussed by the film's straight-faced dramatic approach. The film more or less takes Walton's incredible story as simple fact, rather than attempting to punch holes in it, and then proceeds to calculate the human toll of such a strange encounter.

Where it counts most: as a human story of loyalty and friendship, and one focusing on Mike Rogers, *Fire in the Sky* succeeds. And that admittedly-inaccurate tour of an alien saucer remains nightmare fodder, pure and simple. Taken in tandem, an image starts to coalesce here: of simple, groping humanity opening its eyes to the great mysteries of our time and coming to understand that its connection to others is the thing it needs to bring with it into that vast unknown.

Ghost in the Machine * *

CAST: Karen Allen (Terry Munroe); Chris Mulkey (Bram Walker); Ted Marcoux (Karl); Hill Horneff (Josh Munroe); Jessica Walter (Elaine); Nancy Fish (Karl's Landlord); Jack Laufer (Elliott); Brendon Quintin Adams (Frazer); Rick Ducommun (Phil); Shevonne Durkin (Carol); Richard McKenzie (Frank Mallory); Mimi Lieber (Martin); Mickey Gilbert (Mickey); Ken Thorley (Salesman).

CREW: 20th Century–Fox Presents a Paul Schiff Production, a Rachel Talalay film. *Castings:* David Ruben, Debra Zane. *Costume Designer:* Isis Mussenden. *Music:* Graeme Revell. *Film Editors:* Janice Hampton, Erica Huggins. *Production Designer:* James Spencer. *Director of Photography:* Phil Meheux. *Written by:* William Davies, William Osborne. *Produced by:* Paul Schiff. *Directed by:* Rachel Talalay. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The Address Book Killer (Marcoux) takes Terry Munroe's (Allen's) address book at the computer store where he works, plotting to murder everyone in it, in the pattern of his previous crimes. In a weird twist of fate, the killer is himself nearly killed in a car accident on a stormy night, only to see his consciousness itself extruded into the mainframe computer at a company called Data Net during an MRI at Southside Hospital. Now in control of the computer, the Address Book Killer takes on a brand new virtual life and resumes the act of hunting single-mom Terry and her rebellious son, Josh (Horneff). Only a reformed hacker, Bram Walker (Mulkey), now working at Data Net, believes Terry's crazy story of the killer's second life and plots to destroy the sadist once and for all by using a particle accelerator...

COMMENTARY: More than a few Americans were wary, even frightened, of the blazing advances in computers during the 1990s. With cheap and easy Internet access, a whole new brand of crime—and a whole new brand of Boogeymen— was born.

Americans feared that thieves might appropriate their identity, that predators might stalk their children anonymously in a chat room, and that crooks could gain access to personal banking information and rob them blind.

"Our film taps into everyone's anxiety," noted producer Paul Schiff, "from the very real concern about one's credit rating to an apprehension of the I.R.S., C.I.A. and F.B.I. that is harder to define.

The film is a cautionary tale about the information age; it's a story about a computer virus that takes on a life of its own."⁴⁰

Given the filmmakers' understanding of the bugaboos involved, it's unfortunate that *Ghost in the Machine*, a horror film concerning a serial killer unloosed in a computer mainframe and therefore able to access ATM, medical and arrest records, fails to resonate in such a fear-laden context. Instead it goes for the path of least resistance and ends up only wasting the kernel of a good idea. It's more a good old-fashioned Freddy Krueger knock-off than computer-age paranoid thriller.

For instance, there's an early scene here in which the "virtual" serial killer, before Terry Munroe's startled eyes, sucks all the money out of her bank account at an ATM terminal. The audience sees the monetary figures dwindle down at frightening pace, into the red. Then a screen legend pops up warning that the "account has been canceled." There's a potent fear realized: your checkbook in the hands of an enemy.



Terry Munroe (Karen Allen) is confronted by a high-tech serial killer, Karl Hochman (Ted Marcoux), in *Ghost in the Machine*.

But there's never any follow-up or follow through to this idea, or even this scene. The audience never sees Terry go to a bank official and complain that she can't access her account. The audience never sees that bank official report that there's no paper trail and that computers don't make that kind of mistake. The film never indicates

that Munroe now suffers under the weight of a money problem, and therefore can't pay bills, for gas, or complete the dozen transactions a day we all take for granted in the Computer Age. Instead, the whole idea is just dropped.

At another point, a character comments that from the keyboard of a computer, even Terry's driver's license could be canceled. Again, a good, timely idea is ignored. The killer never cancels Terry's driver's license, and she never experiences a run-in with the police for driving without one. Once more, the computer demon's potential to really "cage" and "entrap" the Terry character— to make her life a living Hell —is not explored in a way that has psychological depth or resonance.

Instead, *Ghost of the Machine* only offers a sort of sub-par variation on Freddy Krueger-style antics, substituting the famous dream avenger's "rubber reality" for the virtual world depicted with *Tron* (1982)-style visuals. The Address Book Killer also moves through electric wires into any venue and appliance he desires, but this isn't the same as manipulating computer data, the kind of attack a hacker might wage. Instead, the killer microwaves a person to death during an admittedly inventive and gory death sequence. He electrocutes a teenage baby sitter with a washing machine that has flooded onto the floor, and so on. This is not terror by computing, it's terror by electricity. The film even fails on fundamental terminology. At one point, it mistakes a chat for e-mail.

Ghost in the Machine's finale is also baffling. The Address Book Killer leaps out of the computer and electrical "stream" and becomes a corporeal being made of ... something. When Terry tries to hit him, his parts kind of spread out and re-form, leaving him unharmed. Yet he can still grab and hurt mortal beings. In other words, he can touch, but he can't be touched. What is he? What are his powers? The film provides no clue and any relationship to the real fears of the nineties remain unexcavated.

Given the film's general lack of intelligence, it's not really surprising that the human element of *Ghost in the Machine* is as flawed as the techno-jargon. Consider that the Address Book Killer is essentially made immortal in the course of the film, able to shed his body and enter any appliance, any electrical current, and any information system or database. He is, essentially, a God. But instead of taking advantage of his newfound immortality to dominate the world at large, or go anywhere he pleases, he just picks up on the job of stalking Terry. **Rachel Talalay ((1993)).**

All because he happened to steal her address book at his job as a computer shop repairman. That's a pretty flimsy reason to ignore

virtual immortality and the amazing powers that come from being the Lawnmower Man.

Ghost in the Machine knows what it wants to be about. Terry says, at one point, something along the lines of: "you give us Ticketron and we get Big Brother in return," a fairly explicit warning against the building of a computerized police state in which computers are voyeuristic servants. Yet neither the script nor the director, *Freddy's Dead's* Rachel Talalay, care to give this theme much thought. Nope ... they just want to kill people in elaborate stunts and turn a giant particle accelerator into the computer-aged equivalent of Freddy Krueger's boiler room.



Rachel Talalay ((1993). Rachel Talalay (center) watches a scene from her film, *Ghost in the Machine* (1993).

In the 1990s, serial killers came back from the dead using electronics (*Ghost in the Machine*), medicine (*Hideaway*), and the supernatural (*The First Power*). You'd think that such a transformative experience might change the heart of even the most horrible human being, but these movies are all playing by the same cheesy, conventional playbook. What's really scary about *Ghost in the Machine* is that even with a great new "monster" in the modern PC, you can't teach this old horror dog new tricks.

***Ghoulies IV* . (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Stacie Randall (Alexandra); Peter Liapis (Jonathan Graves); Barbara Alyn Woods (Kate); Raquel Krelle (Jeanine); Bobby DiCicco (Scotty); Tony Cox (Ghoulie Dark); Arturo Gil (Ghoulie Lite); Craig Andrew (Mugger); John Cann (Indian Clerk); Michael Chieffo (City Power Worker); Lynn Danielson (Female Victim); Antonia Doran (Lady in Read); Philip McKeon (Demon).

CREW: Cinetel Films Inc., presents a Jim Wynorski film. *Casting:* Russell Gray. *Costume Designer:* Dennis McCarthy. *Production Designer:* Jeannie M. Lomma. *Film Editor:* Richard Gentner. *Director of Photography:* J.E. Bash. *Music:* Chuck Cirino. *Co-Producer:* Catalaine Knell. *Executive Producer:* Russell D. Markowitz. *Written by:* Mark Sevi. *Produced by:* Gary Schmoeller. *Directed by:* Jim Wynorski. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A woman named Alexandra (Randall) attempts to conduct a rite to resurrect her demon masters. It goes wrong and now she needs the pendant belonging to a cop, Jonathan Graves (Liapis) who was once a Satanist himself, to conduct the ritual. Meanwhile, two diminutive ghoulies (Cox, Gil) run amok, making trouble.

COMMENTARY: *Ghoulies IV* is moronic. It strives for a jaunty, campy sense of humor but merely insults the intelligence. In previous *Ghoulies* entries, the titular characters were stop-motion beasts or mechanical effects. Here, there are only two ghoulies, and they're just actors—dwarves—wearing ill-fitting, pull-over masks. You can actually see the actors' natural skin color around the Ghoulie mask eye-holes. The whole movie feels that shoddy and slapped together.

Ghoulies IV's idea of timely humor is to have a character dress and act exactly like Art Carney's Ed Norton on *The Honeymooners* (1955–1956), a TV series which was nearly forty years old when the film was made.

The rest of the film's humor involves the midget ghoulies doing shtick that feels just as dated, like walking around and hiding inside moveable barrels while other cast members pretend to ignore them. The verbal humor is dopey too. Upon arrival in our world and dimension, one ghoulie says, "I don't think we're in Oz anymore." Later, in a bit of more modern, 1990s mold, a ghoulie notes that an incident was "just one of those weird things ... like Clinton getting

elected."

Peter Liapis from the original *Ghoulies* returns for an encore here. He plays the same part as in the original film, but ten years on. Now Jonathan Graves is part of the establishment, a cop, of all things, and so there is a sense of history attached to his character. In a small, unexplored way, the movie involves the duality between Jonathan the cop and Jonathan the Demon of the other world, called Faust. It seems like something better could have been fashioned out of this idea, but *Ghoulies IV* isn't interested. Its heart is in the buxom dominatrix, the silly dwarves, Art Carney and the sub-par special effects.

One character named Alexandra (Randall) tells Jonathan in *Ghoulies IV* to "step back into the darkness you've turned your back on," and that right there is what this movie could have and should have been about. The way we deal with youthful indiscretions; the way we face our past. The way we must, occasionally, go back and deal with things that we've done, whether we want to or not.

But *Ghoulies IV* is so dumb and so campy, that there's no real darkness for Jonathan to turn back to at all. And that lack of "horror" makes this, the last of the *Ghoulies* feature films, a colossal stinker.

***The Good Son* * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Macauley Culkin (Henry); Elijah Wood (Mark); Wendy Crewson (Susan); David Morse (Jack); Daniel Hugh Kelly (Wallace); Jacqueline Brooks (Alice); Quinn Culkin (Connie); Ashley Crow (Janice); Rory Culkin (Richard).

CREW: 20th Century-Fox Presents a Joseph Ruben film. *Casting:* Debora Aquila. *Music:* Elmer Bernstein. *Film Editor:* George Bowes. *Production Designer:* Bill Groom. *Director of Photography:* John Lindley. *Executive Producers:* Ezra Swerdlow, Daniel Rogosin. *Written by:* Ian McEwar. *Produced by:* Mary Anne Page, Joseph Ruben. *Directed by:* Joseph Rubin. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After the death of his mother, young Mark (Wood) goes to live with relatives in Maine while his father, Jack (Morse), finishes a business deal. Mark's nephew is Henry (Culkin), a very bad little boy

and a sociopath. When Henry comes to see Mark as a threat, he begins to frame him for a series of crimes, and Mark's only hope is that Henry's sensitive mother, Susan (Crewson), will trust his version of events.

COMMENTARY: *The Good Son* is *The Bad Seed* (1956) updated for the 1990s. *The Bad Seed* dramatized the tale of young Rhoda Penmark (played with chilling cheeriness by Patty McCormack), a perfectly-dressed, pig-tailed little cherub who attended a good school, and apparently came from good stock ... but was nothing less than a sociopath.

Today, we still refer to a "bad seed" in regards to children whom we think of as "evil." The title itself is a kind of pop-culture shorthand. The reason for the story's longevity is simple: children always represent our tomorrows in horror films and when children are corrupted so is our future. Furthermore, the idea that something so innocent-appearing could actually be so evil is a universal human fear, but especially powerful if you're a parent yourself, if you brought the evil into the world with your own loins.

The Good Son picks up the same debate that *The Bad Seed* left us with some forty years earlier. Is there such a thing as evil, and if so, where does it come from: nature or nurture? In *The Bad Seed*, the answer was simple: nature. Rhoda had bad genes and they manifested themselves in her sociopathic nature. When mother nurturer Christine (Nancy Kelly) couldn't take out her own evil child, Mother Nature had to step in and zap Rhoda with a lightning bolt.

In *The Good Son*, Henry, played by *Home Alone's* (1990) Macauley Culkin, is the evil child, and, like Rhoda Penmark, is a sociopath. In the 1956 film, Rhoda declared that she did not feel "any way at all" about the death of a classmate, Claude. In the 1993 film, Henry observes that he doesn't "feel bad about anything." This includes, apparently, his drowning of his baby sibling in the bathtub.

But *The Good Son* does not explicitly suggest that Henry was "born bad" as the unholy product of nature. On the contrary, the film goes to great lengths to point towards psychological development—nurture—rather than nature. The film obsesses on young Mark's question: "what makes people evil?"



**Two views of a bad seed, Macaulay Culkin as Henry Evans in
The Good Son (1993).**

"I don't believe in Evil," replies his psychologist. "Evil is a word people use when they've given up trying to explain something."

So how do you explain Henry? Well, you have to look at the late 1980s and early 1990s. This was a period which brought lower infant mortality rates, fewer high-school drop-outs and less teen pregnancies, all positive steps. But it was also an era of expanding media saturation.

Children learn by imitating behaviors they have seen, whether on television or in film, and that may be at the root of the issue here. On the positive side, media can help ease readiness for learning and expose students to great music, art and performance. On the negative side, some media sensationalize violent behavior and acts, and children may be prone to imitating that violent behavior.

Consider that 1990s America is often called "The Cynical Society" and that in the 1990s a generation of children was exposed to increasingly sophisticated, increasingly accessible media. The home computer and violent video games, for instance. More than that, the 1990s was the decade of the Internet, and the first full decade of PG-13, a rating which brought scarier movies to younger children.

In *The Good Son*, Henry keeps a box of cigarettes in a hidden location and smokes them. "Who cares? You're going to die anyway?" he declares. Henry has either observed adults smoking, or has seen smoking in film and television. Either way, he has learned this behavior; *it was nurture, not nature*.

Again, the movie doesn't go into explicit detail about this, but it is, at least, implicit. For instance, Henry is quite the inventor. When he first appears in the film, he is wearing a home-made "slasher"-type mask. Later, he builds a bolt gun that kills a dog. In his worst transgression, he throws a Dummy "Mr. Highway" off a bridge as cars are approaching and causes a giant accident of at least a dozen vehicles. Somewhere, Henry has acquired the skills to do these things.

He has seen this behavior modeled somewhere and is imitating and modifying that behavior to suit his own anti-social purposes.

The Good Son is very much a battle between Henry, a child with no empathy, and Mark, a child with too much empathy. Henry feels nothing, and ruthlessly manipulates people to serve his purposes. Mark has blamed himself for the death of his mother after he promised he wouldn't let her die, and he suffers from intense guilt. The two boys battle for the approval and love of Susan (Crewson), the movie's mother figure, who must make a nature versus nurture choice of her own.

At the movie's conclusion, the last word in cliffhanging finales, she holds a boy in each hand, over a seaside precipice. In one hand is Henry, representing nature—biology. He is her biological son, but he is a sociopath. In the other hand is Mark, another woman's son, but one has been truthful and heroic. In saving Mark, Susan chooses nurture over nature: Mark is more like the boy she wishes she had raised. Also, it is not hard to interpret Susan's decision as an acknowledgment that "biology" in the 1990s does not necessarily equate with family. Many children in this era and in ensuing ones lived with at least one parent who was not biological and often with a sibling too. The form of the American family was in transition, and subtly, *The Good Son* acknowledges that fact.

The Good Son is a kind of an interloper film in reverse. Here, the interloper is Mark, coming into a biological family that is not his own. But he is not the source of evil. No, the source of evil is already present, in Henry. Because Mark is an outsider (another definition of interloper), Susan and her husband are reluctant to trust him over Henry. He is easily framed for Henry's misdeeds because of his status. Like other examples of the interloper film, pets or animals are amongst the first victims, a sign of more violence to come. Here, Henry shoots his bolt gun at a cat and a dog. The dog doesn't make it.

But *The Good Son* gains most of its power from its conclusion, in which a woman must choose between her biological offspring and her "spiritual" child. The film ends with a rattled Mark, back home safely, thinking about "Susan's choice."

And here's the real difference between *The Good Son* and *The Bad Seed*: *The Good Son* demands action from the mother of a bad kid. In *The Bad Seed*, the mother was helpless before the power of Rhoda, unable to turn her in, unable to stop her. In *The Good Son*, Susan steps up and ends the terror herself, at great consequence. Mother Nurturer steps up to right a wrong, establishing both the strength of mothers in general and suggesting that what we create and nurture, we must also,

ultimately, deal with. In the era of interlopers and serial killers—very human monsters—that's a powerful statement of personal accountability and responsibility.

***Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* * .**

Critical Reception

"From Part Seven right up through *Freddy versus Jason*, the top brass at Friday the 13th Inc. have seemed fiercely determined to leave no shark unjumped. And yet while the basic plotline of *Jason Goes to Hell* is as ludicrous as anything else the series has offered, this one benefits from a sharper script and much more interesting characters than any of the other latter-day sequels. And unlike some previous installments, no one can accuse *Jason Goes to Hell* of skimping on gratuitous nudity and jaw-dropping violence, and let's not kid ourselves—those are the only reasons we're still watching slasher films after all these years."—John Bowen, *Rue Morgue*

"A tired formula tries for something new and not very successfully. The final Freddy Krueger cameo is probably the only thing to recommend this film."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"See: *Freddy's Dead*. I give the filmmakers credit for trying to do something

drastically different with this tired old franchise, but it just doesn't work. By this point we've come so far from the original Victor Miller concept that made the original such a gem that we have to wonder how—or why—we ever got here in the first place."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: John D. LeMay (Steven Freeman); Kari Keegan (Jessica Kimble); Kane Hodder (Jason Voorhees); Steven Williams (Creighton Duke); Steven Culp (Robert Campbell); Erin Gray (Diana Kimble); Rusty Schwimmer (Joey B.); Richard Gant (Coroner); Leslie Jordan (Shelby); Billy Green Bush (Sheriff Landis); Kipp Marcus (Randy); Andrew Bloch (Josh); Adam Cranner (Ward); Allison Smith (Vicki);

Julie Michaels (Elizabeth Marcus, FBI).

CREW: New Line Cinema presents a Sean S. Cunningham Production. *Casting:* Hughes/Moss, David Giella. *Special Make-up Effects:* Kurtzman, Nicotero and Berger, EFX Group. *Special Visual Effects:* Al Magliochetti. *Director of Photography:* William Dill. *Line Producer:* Deborah Hayn-Cass. *Film Editor:* David Handman. *Music:* Harry Manfredini. *Story:* Jay Huguely, Adam Marcus. *Screenplay:* Dean Lorey, Jay Huguely. *Produced by:* Sean S. Cunningham. *Directed by:* Adam Marcus. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The F.B.I. lures mass murderer Jason Voorhees (Hodder) into a trap at Crystal Lake, dousing the killer with bullets and blowing him up with a missile. Later, during an autopsy in Ohio, Jason's evil spirit passes on to an unlucky coroner (Gant), and the reign of terror continues. Meanwhile, back at Crystal Lake, bounty hunter Creighton Duke (Williams) warns Jason's biological sister, Diana (Gray), that she and her daughter, Jessica (Keegan), will be Jason's next targets. Before long, the tabloid TV series *American Case Files*, hosted by Robert Campbell (Culp), descends on Crystal Lake in hopes of big ratings, as does the body-hopping Jason. Jessica's ex-boyfriend Steve (Le May), the father of their infant child, is the only protector standing between Jessica and Jason.

COMMENTARY: What the hell is this, *The Hidden* (1987)?

Jason Voorhees, the long-lived hockey masked, machete-wielding slasher of the 1980s is resurrected for one more film in the underwhelming ninth entry of the popular *Friday the 13th* series, and the only entry of the 1990s. Adam Marcus's film jettisons much of Jason's background history and overwrites it with a new myth meant to explain Jason's supernatural abilities, including his newfound ability to "possess" one human body after another.

Most glaringly, *Jason Goes to Hell* suffers from *Halloween* envy, as if the creators of *Jason Goes to Hell* had actually wanted to write a story for Michael Myers but were saddled with Jason instead. Consider that this "Final Friday" features significant scenes set at the "Voorhees House," even though audiences had never before in fact seen a Voorhees House at Crystal Lake. Rather, Jason lived out in a small shed in the woods with the severed head of his decapitated mother in *Friday the 13th: Part II* (1981). No matter, this house is Jason's mailing address apparently, and everybody in town knows where it is. Which raises the question: why is it so difficult to capture and kill Jason if

you know his exact street address?

Again, its *Halloween* envy: the Myers House plays a considerable role in the terror of the *Halloween* series, so why not give Jason a house too?

Secondly, audiences learn for the first time in *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* that Jason can only be killed by a woman of Voorhees birth ... meaning his sister, his niece, or grand niece, I guess. This fact requires Jason to set out after his only remaining family members, another clear parallel to Michael Myers, who, in chasing Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) or even Jamie, is offing female survivors of the Myers line.

Apparently it isn't only *Halloween* that *Jason Goes to Hell* envies, but also the *Evil Dead* films, since Tom Sullivan's *Book of the Dead* appears in this film, along with what appears to be a Deadite-style knife. The script establishes that only a Voorhees woman, bearing this particular knife, can kill Jason. So there you have it: Jason is a Deadite. Who knew?

All kidding aside, about the only frightening element of the *Friday the 13th* series was the killer himself: a big, unstoppable Mack Truck of a murderer. Wielding his trademark machete and wearing his tattered old hockey mask, the over-sized Jason is still good for working up a scare or two. But the dreadful *Jason Goes to Hell* screenplay removes Jason's sense of physical presence, save for some Jason appearances in the mirror, and a re-birth in the climax, instead leaving us with a number of less-than-inspiring standins. Jason possesses a black coroner, a diminutive police deputy, a reality-tv host (*Desperate Housewives*' Steven Culp) and a skinny guy named Randy ... also a cop.



Jason Voorhees (Kane Hodder) walks through fire in *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* (1993).

These gents may be unkillable, but they just ain't scary. Behind the hockey mask, Jason is a blank terror and the audience isn't looking at an actor, but an icon. Sans mask, the audience is just watching a bunch of less-than-great actors try to look evil as they beat people up. The whole body jumping conceit seems ripped from *The Hidden* anyway, and it adds nothing to the story.

Nothing makes much sense in this underwhelming sequel. For instance, why does bounty hunter Creighton Duke insist on breaking Steve's fingers every time he shares some information about Jason? This unlikely torture isn't merely ridiculous, but counterproductive. At this point in the film Duke is incarcerated in jail and can use all the allies he can find ... especially one willing to believe him. What purpose does it serve him, personally or professionally, to abuse the only man who actually believes his wild stories about Voorhees?

Another scene involving a massacre in a Crystal Lake diner stumbles over the line between comedy and horror and is so cartoony in look, style and performance that the movie never recovers from it.

As the 1980s turned into the 1990s, horror movies began to feature a dawning awareness of themselves, their genre and most importantly, their history. We see that dawning awareness in its infancy with films like *Jason Goes to Hell*. It plays primarily not to Friday night theater-goers but to the rapidly-coming-of-age VCR generation, which has watched every horror movie under the sun. Accordingly, there's a jokey acknowledgment of the form's past here,

with a reference to the "Myers Place" in one line of dialogue, plot similarities to the *Halloween* films and *The Hidden*, the inclusion of props from *The Evil Dead* films, and the final *coup de grâce*: Freddy's ascent from Hell to pull down Jason's hockey mask with his trademark knife-laden glove. None of these moments are particularly smart. They aren't very funny, either. Instead, they are there simply so horror fans can catch the references.

Again, this period in the early 1990s, particularly pre- *Scream*, represents the stumbling beginning of horror's post-modern phase. The gags are no yet witty, not yet used to surprise or titillate, but rather just signposts that shout "Hey, we've seen the same movies, dude!" It's a juvenile kind of post-modernism but also the first sign that horror filmmakers were realizing their work wasn't simply disposable, not just viewed in theaters and then disappearing with no afterlife.

In the grand scheme of *Friday the 13th* movies *Jason Goes to Hell* is one of the worst. It doesn't boast the cheap, made-in-Canada patina of the previous entry, 1989's *Jason Takes Manhattan*, but it lacks the naturalistic bluntness of such strong (early) series entries as *Friday the 13th* (1980) and *Friday the 13th Part II* (1981). Those films didn't need supernatural hijinks or body switching gimmicks to make a murderous villain scary, but the overlay of these elements in *Jason Goes to Hell* don't give this film any particular boost, either.

LEGACY: After *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday*, the *Friday the 13th* series went into hibernation for the remainder of the 1990s. *Jason X* (2000) sent the serial killer into space, another Hail Mary pass attempt to return the franchise to its former glory. In 2004, the sequel promised in *Jason Goes to Hell's* coda *Freddy vs. Jason* was a big hit ... if not a particularly good movie. Finally, in 2009, the series went back to basics with a remake of the original *Friday the 13th*.

Jurassic Park * * * *

Critical Reception

"From the moment one heard the concept of Crichton's original novel, you just knew Hollywood would come calling, and while it suffers from Spielberg's attempts to draw in the kids, this was a truly memorable film on first watch—the initial

sightings of the brachiosaur were revolutionary in their time. There are many good things about this film—the special effects were top notch, John Williams delivered a fine score, the performances are good—it all feels like product however, the summer blockbuster perfectly realized in its formula, and one wishes a hungry young director eager to prove his or her mettle might have taken this film to an edgier place."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"A Spielberg triumph, boasting the most unbelievable CGI effects that had been put on the screen up to that point. You can quibble about plot and character development all you want, but once you witness a herd of grazing brontosaurus, it all pretty much becomes moot. Terrific eye candy, with a standout John Williams score to boot."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Sam Neill (Dr. Alan Grant); Laura Dern (Dr. Ellie Sattler); Jeff Goldblum (Dr. Ian Malcolm); Richard Attenborough (John Hammond); Bob Peck (Robert Muldoon); Martin Ferrero (Donald Gennaro); Samuel L. Jackson (Ray Arnold); Joseph Mazzello (Tim Murphy); Ariana Richards (Lex Murphy); B.D. Wong (Henry Wu); Wayne Knight (Dennis Nedry); Jerry Moel (Gerry Harding); Miguel Sandoval (Juanito Rostagno); Lewis Dodgson (Cameron).

CREW: Universal Pictures presents an Amblin Entertainment Production of a Steven Spielberg film. *Production Designer:* Rick Carter. *Director of Photography:* Dean Cundey. *Film Editor:* Michael Kahn. *Music:* John Williams. *Produced by:* Kathleen Kennedy. *Based on the novel by:* Michael Crichton. *Written by:* Michael Crichton, David Koepp. *Directed by:* Steven Spielberg. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 127 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On Isla Nublar, an island near Costa Rica, *InGen* CEO John Hammond (Richard Attenborough) has created genetically engineered dinosaurs, using dinosaur DNA found in mosquito corpses trapped in amber. He plans to open an amusement park for the wealthy, called Jurassic Park, where visitors can see (for a modest fee) a T-Rex, brontosaurus, triceratops and even the vicious, pack hunting velociraptors. As the opening date nears, Hammond's lawyer, Gennaro (Ferrero), voices investor safety concerns about the live attractions and demands that Hammond get "experts" to sign off on the park.

Hammond recruits paleontologists Alan Grant (Neill) and Ellie Sattler (Dern), plus chaos theory philosopher Ian Malcolm (Jeff Goldblum) for the job. They join Hammond's grandchildren, Tim (Mazzello) and Lex (Richards), on a tour of the dinosaur attractions, only to fall prey to a high-tech saboteur, Nedry (Knight), who shuts down all park systems ... including security, to cover his corporate espionage. As a tropical storm washes across the island, Alan and the others must deal with rampaging dinosaurs on the loose.

COMMENTARY: Based on the best-selling novel by Michael Crichton, Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* is a modern-day *Frankenstein* story, the cautionary tale of an arrogant company that chooses to "tamper in God's domain" on a tropical island and re-create dinosaurs there some sixty-five million years after their extinction. Suddenly, two species—man and dinosaur—"are thrown into the mix together." In short order, the human environs are overrun and dinosaurs again rule the Earth, or at least remote Isla Nublar.

A science run amok film of unimpeachable production values, *Jurassic Park* expresses the fear that gene splicing technology and gene therapy will open up a whole new realm in which scientists can play God. In the film, the full dinosaur DNA code could not be mapped, and the scientists "filled in the gaps" with frog DNA. In other words, they experimented and created something totally new.

In one of the most memorable images of the 1990s, Spielberg provides a visual representation of the dinosaur's real nature. A velociraptor prowls a computer control room and very briefly the image reflected on his reptilian face from a nearby monitor is that of the *genetic code*, of letters G, C, A, T, repeated in large blocks of print. The crossing of a prehistoric creature's visage with overlay of modern gene technology encapsulates perfectly the movie's argument of science as monster.

Jurassic Park's central conceit is that man cannot, in any way, control another life form like the dinosaur, even though he has created it in the lab; that, as the film states on more than one occasion, "nature" or "life" finds a way. The dinosaurs on the island are all bred female, for instance, but once in the wild, some are able to utilize their frog DNA to actually alter their sex ... and breed. "Life will not be contained," as one character suggests. It has found a way to flourish and, incidentally, defy its "fathers" at InGen.

Chaos theorist Malcolm (Goldblum), one of the film's most interesting human characters, sees clearly both science's "lack of humility" in the face of new technology and the fact that no one will

be able to predict what happens next, now that Pandora's Box has been opened. Chaos theory is the study of how small variations in conditions yield unexpected (but not entirely random) results. And that's part of the "life finds a way" undercurrent of *Jurassic Park*. Hammond's geneticists have not considered all the angles before recreating dinosaurs and the results yield dramatic and surprising outcomes.

Uniquely, the "kid friendly" subplot of *Jurassic Park*, which fits the oeuvre of Steven Spielberg (*E.T.* [1982]) even if it doesn't quite feel apiece with the hard-science world of Michael Crichton, supports the film's "life will find a way" leitmotif. Alan Grant (Sam Neill) is a man who does not like children, or even being in the presence of children. He is not a family man, to put it mildly. Likewise, Tim and Lex, Hammond's grandchildren, lack a father or mother on the island.



Dr. Alan Grant (Sam Neill) attempts to distract a hungry T-Rex from eating two children in an action scene from Steven Spielberg's 1993 blockbuster, *Jurassic Park*.

During the course of the adventure, however, Grant and the children grow close. Biologically, human children need adults to protect them and to mentor them. And human adults will fill their biological roles too: protecting the young. Life "finds a way" of bringing this adult and these children together into the equivalent of a family. It is a surprise to Grant and the kids (if not to fans of Spielberg's films) that this bonding occurs, and it too reflects chaos theory.

Considering this subtext, *Jurassic Park* represents a classic battle between man and nature. Nature, in the form of the dinosaurs—and also a raging, tropical storm—overruns the island, and technology fails. The computers shut down. The cars don't operate properly. The power fails, and on and on. If man places his faith in science, not nature, the film suggests, he's going to have a lot more bad days like the one on Isla Nublar.

Or, as author James Spence succinctly puts it in his essay "What's Wrong with Cloning a Dinosaur?" *Jurassic Park* concerns "our limited capacity to control our own technological innovations."⁴¹

Speaking of technical innovation, *Jurassic Park* is masterpiece of the genre not simply because it reflects the 1990s fear of science run amok (specifically genetic science), but because the special effects are, in a word, captivating. They are breathtaking. Children for generations have dreamed of seeing real dinosaurs. How they move, how they sound, how they eat. Since *King Kong* (1933) and stop-motion photography, no film has succeeded in making these giant lizards seem realistic. But by 1993, stop-motion-photography was played out as a useful technology, having reached its heyday in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Other options, like filming live lizards (in films such as *One Million B.C.* and *The Lost World* [1960]) are notably lame, and children realize it.



***Jurassic Park's* T-Rex stalks his prey, while Dr. Grant (Sam Neill) does his best to stay very, very still.**

But the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* are astonishing. The first time I saw the film, and the sequence of a herd of brontosaurus grazing in a field, reaching for leaves on a high tree, I felt myself tearing up, a lump in my throat. These dinosaurs appeared real, graceful and beautiful. There is not an ounce of phoniness in their physicality or presence, and that alone makes *Jurassic Park* stand out. This statement is equally true of the dinosaurs on the attack as it is of them at rest, or luxuriating. The velociraptors move with ferocity and speed, and seem truly alive.

The dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* were created by a combination of techniques. Special effects genius Stan Winston (1946–2008) created animatronic, life-sized replicas of many dinosaurs and controlled them on-set using cable actuation, rod-puppets, men-in-suits, cranes, radio

control, hydraulics and whatever else he thought could get the job done.

Amazingly, the tyrannosaurus he created for the film was forty feet high. But this mechanical approach was not the only one. Phil Tippet and Dennis Muren at ILM used Pixar Animation Studio's Renderman software to create photo-real, digital dinosaurs. What's so amazing in the film is that there are no seams between approaches, between on-set mock-ups and CGI dinosaurs rendered in post-production. *Jurassic Park* is a gigantic leap forward in special effects evolution, and features some of the most fantastic creature effects you'll ever see.

The dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* are not just cookie-cutter dinosaurs, either, but in some sense, personalities. The velociraptors evidence a malevolent brand of intelligence and cunning, and the set-piece involving their hunt of Hammond's grandchildren in a kitchen is a classic of suspense and effective staging.

The T-Rex, in accordance with his name, has a regal quality about him. In one of the film's many splendid visual jokes, the T-Rex enters the amusement park museum/visitor center foyer, usurps center stage (replacing shattered dinosaur skeletons), and literally vogues, to use Madonna's 1990s phrase. As it roars, showing off its magnificent form, a banner reading "when dinosaurs walked the Earth" flutters to the ground. The real deal has replaced Hammond's marketing hype ... and it is spectacular.

Jurassic Park even climaxes on a majestic, lyrical note. The survivors from the island are evacuated on a helicopter. Over the sea, on the return trip, Alan and the others watch beautiful ocean birds in flight, visually drawing the connection to the animals on the island and their "evolved" counterparts in today's world. The images seem to articulate a point of view: *this* is how to see dinosaurs today, in these amazing creatures, not in recreated Frankenstein monsters. It's a splendid note to leave the adventure on, and it's the punctuation of the two-hour debate about the role of science in civilization and the belief that just because we can do a thing (like clone dinosaurs) we should do a thing.

Jurassic Park the movie is not *Jurassic Park*, the book. Spielberg's production is noticeably softer and more sentimental. The film shows sympathy for Hammond, a villain in the book who gets his guts devoured by velociraptors. In fact, Spielberg stages a scene in which Hammond compares the real dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park* to a flea circus from his youth. He just wants to wow an audience with something real, not a gimmick—but with reality comes chaos.

Jurassic Park also features fun and games with the kiddies, and it is more overtly humorous than the book (largely due to Jeff Goldblum's inspired line readings). In the final analysis, however, the movie doesn't crimp on the thrills or the horror either. The T-Rex eats a lawyer, the dilophosaurus paralyzes the saboteur, Nedry, with its venom and then eats him, and the pouncing, leaping velociraptors are terrific screen monsters, in part because we can relate to them on a recognizable human scale, both in terms of their size and intelligence.

Spielberg set out with *Jurassic Park*, he once noted, to make a really good sequel to *Jaws*, only with dinosaurs instead of a great white shark. *Jurassic Park* is not as nasty, not as vicious as that seventies horror classic, but it makes up for its soft underbelly with special effects grandeur.

Simply put, leaping lizards have never looked so good or so scary.

Kalifornia * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Brad Pitt (Earley Grayce); Juliette Lewis (Adele Corner); David Duchovny (Brian Kessler); Michelle Forbes (Carrie Laughlin); David Rose (Eric); John Zarchon (Peter); Judson Vaughn (Parole Officer); Sierra Pecheur (Mrs. Musgrove).

CREW: Polygram Filmed Entertainment in association with Viacom and Propaganda Films. *Casting:* Carol Lewis. *Music:* Carter Burwell. *Film Editor:* Martin Hunter. *Production Designer:* Michael White. *Director of Photography:* Bojan Bozelli. *Executive Producer:* Jim Kouf. *Screenplay by:* Tim Metcalfe. *Story by:* Steven Levy, Tim Metcalfe. *Produced by:* Steve Golin, Sigurion Sighvatsson, Aristides McGarry. *Directed by:* Dominic Serra. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 115 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A writer, Brian Kessler (Duchovny), and his girlfriend, Carrie (Forbes), prep a book on infamous serial killers by visiting the locations where famous examples of the breed committed murder. On the long road trip to California they ride-share with another couple—the redneck, Early (Pitt), and his naïve girlfriend, Adele (Lewis). To Brian and Carrie's surprise, they have a serial killer in their car, and

tensions rise as Early seems ever more dangerous.

COMMENTARY: A redneck serial killer threatens two liberal elites, including a self-important, intellectual writer in Dominic Serra's *Kalifornia*, and the most surprising thing about this is that, at first, the writer seems to like it.

The film's protagonist, Brian (Duchovny), not only has a handful of excuses for Early's wayward ways, he even admires how Early can "live in a moment," and how the violent man handles threats, like the macho thugs who bother the guys while on a "Boy's Night Out." Early is something Brian will never be: a man who lives without regard for second thoughts, without hedging or examining. Where Brian is circumspect, Early is direct. Where Brian ponders, Early acts.

But ultimately, Brian comes to realize that Early doesn't temper his confidence with responsibility, and that this may be the very thing that separates the breed of serial killer from the breed of man. Unlike Brian, who is constantly trying to contextualize his experiences (and also the experiences of serial killers, for his book), Early lives an entirely unexamined life. If you can't look back, you can't experience remorse, and perhaps that is one of the seeds of serial killer behavior, the film artfully implies.

A tense road movie, *Kalifornia* pits Brian "the brain" against Early (kind of like "early," primitive man) and compares their personalities. Brian wants to "ignore the clichés" and see the world with fresh eyes. Early doesn't know what a cliché is. Brian feels sorry for everyone. Early feels sorry for no one. Brian is slow to action, especially violence. Early is trigger-happy and prone to excessive violence. In comparing and contrasting these two individuals, *Kalifornia* is the story of a writer who realizes, finally, that he has romanticized his subject matter to an inappropriate degree. He's gotten carried away with his own ideas, and in this case, it's dangerous.

In Brian's research, in his assessment, serial killers always have motives and reasons and causes for their actions, based on who they are, what happened to them, and where they were raised. What Early seems to signify, however, is that motivations are not the point. "I'll never know why Early Grayce became a killer. I don't know why any of them did," Brian finally admits. "When I looked into his eyes I felt nothing, nothing. That day I learned any one of us is capable of taking another human life. But I also learned there is a difference between us and them: it's feeling remorse. Dealing with it. Confronting a conscience. Early never did."

Notably, *Kalifornia* also compares and contrasts its two women, smart and insightful Carrie, and clueless, perpetual victim Adele (Lewis). Carrie sees cold, hard reality, and understands quickly the menace that Early represents, a fact which makes her character a relative of the "final girl" archetype. But Adele is a hopeless romantic, fantasizing about a future in which she and Early play house together in California, neighbors with Carrie and Brian.

Both women are enablers of their men, at least to a degree, but Adele is the only one who is going to pay for this behavior with her life. Anyway, it's funny how each couple in the movie thinks that it is the *other* couple that seems strange, alien. The early scenes in the film make good use of this "shotgun marriage" (the ride share) premise, balancing an urbane, sophisticated couple with the white trash one.

In some ways, Brian is more like Adele than either Carrie or Early, dreaming of serial killers and naively believing he can understand their nature. The romantic, naïve qualities of Brian and Adele are also reflected in the journey's destination, the mythical land of California, where all debts will disappear, where careers will turn successful, where projects will complete themselves.

"If you could just get there, everything would be okay," Brian suggests.

When *Kalifornia* gets around to the action of the finale, it underwhelms. On the other hand, when the movie excavates its real point, that people can't understand serial killers by "tourism" of famous murder sites, *Kalifornia* emerges as not just a story of personal growth and the end of romantic fantasy but as a comment on American tabloid culture, which, much like Brian himself, dreamed perpetually of serial killers in the 1990s, fetishizing every little brutal act for TV audiences, but never digging below the surface to deal with the essence of their nature.

Leprechaun *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Warwick Davis (Leprechaun); Jennifer Aniston (Tory); Ken Olandt (Nathan); Mark Holton (Ozzie); Robert Gorman (Alex); Shay Duffin (O'Grady); John Voldstad (Shop Owner); John Sanderford (J.D.); Pamela Mant (Mrs. O'-Grady); William Newman (Sheriff

Cronin).

CREW: Trimark Pictures Presents a Mark Jones Film. *Executive Producer:* Mark Amin. *Director of Photography:* Levie Isaacks. *Production Designer:* Naomi Slodki. *Film Editor:* Christopher Roth. *Casting:* Lisa London. *Leprechaun Makeup:* Gabe Bartalos. *Music:* Kevin Kiner. *Produced by:* Jeffrey B. Mallian. *Written and Directed by:* Mark Jones. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A Leprechaun (Davis) attacks an Irishman, O'Grady (Duffin), and his wife (Mant) after he steals the creature's prized pot of gold. O'Grady traps the creature in a crate using a four leaf clover as protection and then suffers a heart attack. Ten years later, sexy Tory (Aniston) and her Dad spend the summer at the O'Grady place while three workmen—hunky Nathan (Olandt), precious Alex (Gorman) and simpleton Ozzie (Holton)—paint it. In short order, Ozzie frees the Leprechaun and the malevolent creature resumes the search for his 100 gold coins ... which Alex and Ozzie have found and hidden.

COMMENTARY: Rarely in horror history has so much been constructed from so little. The 1993 movie *Leprechaun* has spawned four sequels as of 2011, and has become part of the firmament of the American pop culture lexicon. The horror franchise owes its longevity to the Jones original, which—on a cost of less than a million dollars—grossed nearly ten times that amount. In fact, *Leprechaun* opened at the U.S. box office the same weekend as the acclaimed Jack Nicholson drama *Hoffa*, and, astoundingly, battled it to a draw at the box office, with both films earning 2.5 million dollars. But importantly, *Leprechaun* played on 620 screens compared to *Hoffa's* 1,100. Likewise, the VHS release proved a smash hit, selling 100,000 copies.

It must be the luck of the Irish...

It certainly can't be the quality of the film itself that's responsible for all that financial success because *Leprechaun* is a one-note joke with a subpar script, poor pacing and not one genuine scare. The characters are off-the-shelf stereotypes, from the wisecracking kid with the big vocabulary, to his best friend, the oafish but innocent Ozzie.

Admittedly, Jones' direction is quickly established as superior to his writing, and he competently stages a few *Tremors*- style chase sequences, replete with a low-perched camera in pursuit of victims and final girl Jennifer Aniston. But otherwise, the film is so stupid it

hurts.

The game here involves the organizing principle, a key element of the slasher movie paradigm, and one that provides a genre film with a necessary umbrella of unity. The organizing principle in this grim fairy tale is Irish lore, the specifics of leprechaun legends.

These tales provide the film the Leprechaun's purpose (a search for a pot of gold), the nature of the weapon that can destroy him (a four leaf clover), the tools to evade him (the sprite's obsessive-compulsive fascination with shoes), and even the location of the 100 gold coins (at the end of a rainbow). Similarly, the film's narrative begins with another key element of leprechaun myths: the idea that once captured, a leprechaun must reveal the location of his treasure.

The organizing principle also permits for the leprechaun to wallow in Freddy Krueger-style juicy *bon mots* ("Your luck just ran out!") and even pop culture references, such as the inevitable appearance of the Lucky Charms breakfast cereal. Most of this material qualifies as obvious and is handled with something less than panache.

In fact, *Leprechaun* looks and sounds like a bad TV-movie. The film's North Dakota location conveniently resembles Southern California, the actors don't seem in on the joke, and the film shows signs of post-production fiddling, namely the inclusion of several fast-motion moments to augment the comedic aspects of the villain. Finally, the film doesn't even play fair with audiences. Once the leprechaun escapes the crate and his powers grow, he utilizes his capacity to teleport—to materialize and de-materialize at will. He magically appears in a refrigerator, inside a kitchen cabinet, and so forth. This deflates the siege situation, which finds the film's *dramatis personae* trapped in a house while the leprechaun is outside.

If the leprechaun can appear and disappear at will, and beam inside and outside of houses, how can a vegetarian, a hunk, a wise-cracking kid and an oaf beat him?

Leprechaun really is a lucky film, if you think about it. Consider the films that have spawned franchises in horror's history: *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *The Exorcist* (1973), *Jaws* (1975), *Halloween* (1978), *Alien* (1979), *Friday the 13th* (1980), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *Hellraiser* (1987), *Child's Play* (1988) and *Candyman* (1992). Those films are great, or at the very least pretty good. Their sequels degenerated in quality over the years and over the decades. But the *Leprechaun* series starts at the level of sub-par efforts such as *Jason Takes Manhattan* (1989) or *Freddy's Dead* (1993), making it entirely unworthy of such success.

I know, there will be readers who insist I have no sense of fun, or that I'm being too hard on *Leprechaun*. On the contrary, I understand what *Leprechaun* was aiming for (a kind of breathless horror-comedy with gore and laughs alternating), but it doesn't succeed. A film that attempts to do the same thing called *Dr. Giggles* manages this mix much more adroitly. It may not be Shakespeare, but at least it's watchable. By contrast, *Leprechaun* threatens to fall apart before your very eyes.

About the only thing that could make me interested in *Leprechaun* again would be news of Jennifer Aniston starring in 2013's *L20: Leprechaun 20 Years Later*.

Somehow, I don't think that's going to happen.

LEGACY: *Leprechaun* spawned three sequels, including *Leprechaun 2*, *Leprechaun 3*, *Leprechaun 4: In Space*, and in the twenty-first century, *Leprechaun in the Hood*.

***Maniac Cop 3: Badge of Silence* * . (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Robert Z'Dar (Matt Cordell); Robert Davi (Sean McKinney); Caitlin Dulany (Dr. Susan Fowler); Gretchen Becker (Kate Sullivan); Paul Gleason (Hank Cooney); Jackie Earle Haley (Jessup); Julius Harris (Houngan); Grand Bush (Willie); Doug Savant (Dr. Peter Myerson); Frank Pesce (Tribble); Robert Forster (Powell); Lou Diaz (Leon); Ted Raimi (Reporter); Brenda Varda (Lindsey); Vanessa Marquez (Terry); Vinnie Curto (Keryon); Victor Manni (Shotgun cop); Jason Lustig (EMT Driver); Hillary Black (Dr. Everett); Bill Irving (Elderly Patient); Harri Jones (Radiation Therapist).

CREW: Neo Motion Pictures and First Look Productions present a Larry Cohen Production. *Executive Producer:* W.K. Border. *Casting:* Cathy Henderson Blake, Tom McSweeney. *Production Designer:* Clark Hunter. *Music:* Joel Goldsmith. *Film Editor:* David Kern Michael Elcot. *Director of Photography:* Jacques Haitkin. *Co-Producer:* Larry Cohen. *Produced by:* Joel Soisson, Michael Leahy. *Directed by:* William Lustig. *Additional scenes directed by:* Joel Soisson. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Matt Cordell (Z'Dar) is brought back from the dead during a voodoo ritual and resumes patrolling the mean streets of Los Angeles. When an injured young cop, Kate Sullivan (Becker), is brought to the hospital badly injured following a liquor store robbery, the Maniac Cop comes to her aid, killing doctors who would euthanize her prematurely. Cordell also takes out her assailant, who is to be let free by the City, which fears a lawsuit over the shooting. Meanwhile, Kate's friend Detective McKinney (Davi) and a lovely physician, Dr. Fowler (Dulany), attempt to stop Cordell's latest killing spree.

COMMENTARY: Something has gone terribly wrong with the final chapter of *The Maniac Cop* series. Perhaps the movie was unable to overcome the behind-the-scenes intrigue, namely the musical-chairs directorship (first William Lustig, then producer Joel Soisson). But regardless of how it happened, *Badge of Silence* is more like a badge of shame than a satisfying sequel.

The film is structured poorly, so that prominent actors arrive in the picture for extended cameos only to be killed promptly by Cordell in inventive fashion. Doug Savant shows up for awhile and is blasted with defibrillator paddles. The great Robert Forster breezes in for two scenes and then gets strapped to a table and sizzled by x-rays. Even Jackie Earle Haley, as the cop-killer, shows up for just a few memorable and violent scenes before disappearing. This unsatisfactory approach to storytelling takes focus off of Davi's lead character, where it belongs. You'd think when McKinney and Cordell face off here, there would be some frisson, but it's not the case. The two don't seem very interested in each other.

The story itself isn't really worthy of the *Maniac Cop* title either. A voodoo priest, played by Julius Harris (in another prominent cameo), resurrects Cordell, but we don't really have any clue why he has done so. Commenting that to "walk among the living but not be alive" is terrible, Harris's character informs the audience that resurrection is worse than death, a cruel injustice, but doesn't explain why he puts Cordell through it.

Nor does the film explain why, suddenly, Cordell goes to the hospital. Or why the Maniac Cop desires a bride (and selects the comatose Kate Sullivan). Does he want Maniac Cop babies? Maybe this movie should have been titled *Bride of Maniac Cop*.

Perhaps the biggest disappointment of all is simply that two top-flight talents, the socially conscious Larry Cohen and William Lustig,

are involved in this production, and the film seems to have no sense of social consciousness whatsoever. There was a lot of real-life material going on in Los Angeles in the early 1990s: the 1992 riots, the Rodney King incident, and so on, and yet *Maniac Cop 3: Badge of Silence* can't come up with a single comment on this context, in a story set in the very city where it all occurred. Instead, the movie actually adopts a kind of knee-jerk, quasi-fascist stance: the media and lawyers are conspiring to free criminals and harm cops!

With Ted Raimi as a TV reporter mangling the facts of Kate's story and city official Paul Gleason hitting up a lawyer for cocktails, we're supposed to be incensed about criminals winning the day, but it feels rote. Perhaps Raimi's role is also a throwaway commentary on the tabloid culture of the 1990s, but it doesn't really carry much weight in the overall film.

There is one aspect of *Maniac Cop: Badge of Silence*, however, that is totally superior. In the last act there is a sustained chase sequence involving Cordell in a burning car, and McKinney and Fowler in an ambulance. This action scene is amazing, nail biting and incredibly impressive. Some of the elements in the scene include slick night streets, heavy traffic, a bridge, and a conflagration. It's brilliantly orchestrated and pulse-pounding, and a real high point of the movie. Too bad the rest of the movie is so lackadaisical and lame.

***Man's Best Friend* * ***

CAST: Ally Sheedy (Lori Tanner); Lance Henriksen (Dr. Jarret); Robert Costanzo (Detective Kovacs); Fredric Lehne (Perry); John Cassini (Detective Bendetti); J.D. Daniels (Rudy); William Sanderson (Ray); Trula Marcus (Annie); Max (Himself); Rick Barker (Mailman); Bradley Pierce (Chet); Tom Rasales, Jr. (Mugger); Mickey Cassidy (Paper Boy).

CREW: New Line Cinema Presents a Roven-Cavallo Entertainment Production, a John Lafia film. *Casting:* Valerie Massalas. *Max's behavior by:* Clint Rowe. *Special Make-up Effects created by:* Kevin Yagher. *Associate Producer:* Kelley Smith. *Costume Designer:* Beverly Hong. *Music:* Joel Goldsmith. *Production Designer:* Jaymes Hinkle. *Film Editor:* Michael N. Knue. *Director of Photography:* Mark Irwin. *Executive Producer:* Robert Kosberg, Daniel Grodnik. *Produced by:* Bob Engelman. *Special Vocal Effects:* Frank Welker. *Written and directed by:* John Lafia. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A reporter named Lori (Sheedy) sneaks into the E-Max Medical Research Labs and rescues a dog, Max, from the scientists conducting painful and sadistic experiments on him. She brings the dog home with her after Max saves her from a mugger in a grocery store parking lot. Meanwhile, Dr. Jarret (Henriksen) grows desperate to get his test subject back, especially as the genetically-engineered Max grows more bloodthirsty.

COMMENTARY: Now here's an unusual interloper story. It concerns a genetically-engineered dog named Max, dubbed "the guard dog of the future." Like many a cinematic interloper or usurper, Max starts out friendly and helpful— even flushing the household toilet on his own—but soon this mutt goes too far in his quest to become his owner's best friend.

Ally Sheedy plays Max's owner, and she's basically Bridget Fonda to his Jennifer Jason-Leigh. After rescuing Sheedy's news woman, Lori Tanner, from a robbery attempt, Max is brought to her home a hero. Unfortunately, he's also extremely territorial and apparently obsessed with Lori. He kills Lori's other pet, a parrot, a harbinger of the bloodier infractions to come.

This means that the dog urinates in the face of Lori's boyfriend, Perry (Lehne). This means that the dog watches lustfully as Lori showers and as Vince and Perry make love (the sexually-oriented transgression, voyeurism that is always found in films of this type). Max is so smart and possessive that he even manages to cut the brakelines on Perry's car.

Yep, smart dog.

Man's Best Friend starts out as a serious sort of science gone amok—variation on the interloper formula, highlighting a serious and timely debate involving animal rights. Lori and her friend record conditions in the EMAX animal research lab on their video camera and are horrified by what they see. "This is like a concentration camp," Lori complains, deliberately evoking "holocaust" terminology, a critical term in the animal rights battle.

But Dr. Jarrett differs. Experimentation on animals like Max means, ultimately, "saving people's lives." Is that not a greater good?

This was actually a debate raging on American college campuses in the late 1980s—and early 1990s. It was played out across the United States too. The Animal Welfare Act was amended in 1990 to

include new provisions about protecting pets, and by 1991 the organization called PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) was a cause célèbre, boasting some 350,000 members in the United States and launching its famous anti-fur campaign. By the same token, some animal rights groups were taking more violent action in the battle. The ARM (Animal Rights Militia), for instance had begun a campaign of violent property damage as early as 1987.

In terms of the debate, *Man's Best Friend* seems to boast more sympathy for the dog, Max, even though he's a villain. It's clear that Jarrett is interested primarily in financial success ("we're talking about a million dollar research animal," he complains). Although a bad actor and evil doer, Max is just acting according to his genetic crossbreeding. The film reports he possess the DNA of owls, bears, jaguars and all types of dogs. He's a Frankenstein Dog, but one to sympathize with.

By about the mid-point of *Man's Best Friend*, writer and director John Lafia seems to realize that some aspect of this interloper dog is funny, and begin staging his attacks in humorous terms that all dog-lovers will understand. For instance, Max chases a cat to a tree, then—utilizing his strange DNA—extends claws, climbs up the tree and devours the feline. Afterwards, he lets out an earth-shattering belch.



Dog days: Lori Tanner (Ally Sheedy) befriends a genetically-engineered guard dog, Max in *Man's Best Friend* (1993).

Another attack scene is just as ridiculous. Max goes after the paper boy, attacking his bike and puncturing the tire. Then, Max goes after the mail man. This particular scene is filmed in slow motion, as the dog literally goes for the jugular. On top of these dog-oriented "kills," it's hard to take seriously a moment in which Max, utilizing his chameleon DNA, makes himself invisible to onlookers.

So *Man's Best Friend* is a bit of a Frankenstein monster itself. Part of it is a deadly serious interloper about an important topic of the 1990s, animal rights, and the other part of it is horrific parody. Neither part is necessarily worse than the other part, it's just that they—like Max's DNA—don't fit together that well. What we're left with is a kind of half-hearted, half-jokey horror movie. Or maybe it's a monster movie. But if it is a monster movie, it makes a crucial mistake: it never decides how the audience should feel about Max.

Should we love him and root for him or fear him?

By the time *Man's Best Friend* gets to the sting in the tail/tale—the birth of Max's offspring—the movie has distanced the audience from its storyline, and the scene plays like another bad joke.

Woof !

Night Terrors (a.k.a. Tobe Hooper's Night Terrors) *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Robert Englund (Marquis De Sade/Paul Chevalier); Zoe Trilling (Genie); Alona Kimhi (Sabina); Julianno Merr (Mahnoud); Chandra West (Beth); William Finley (Dr. Matteson); Irit Sneleg (Fatima); Nive Cohen (Chuck); Doran Barbi (Ali); Howard Ripp (Harry Matteson's Assistant); Dafna Armoni (Marzille); Yaakov Bana (Chevalier's Servant); Uri Gavriel (Yzutul); Yosef Shiloa (Hardy); Moti Bootbooi (Black Taxi Driver); Tamar Shamit (Snake Woman); Bib Noeman (Gnostic Leader); Daniel E. Matmor (Priest); Dmitri Philips (Duval); Duvi Cohen (Warden).

CREW: Yoram Globus and Christopher Pearce present a Global Pictures production of a Tobe Hooper film. *Make-up effects:* David B. Miller. *Music:* Dov Seltzer. *Film Editor:* Alain Jakubowicz. *Director of Photography:* Amnon Solamon. *Written by:* Daniel Matmor, Rom Globus. *Executive Producers:* Yoram Globus and Christopher Pearce. *Produced by:* Harry Alan Towers. *Directed by:* Tobe Hooper. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The archaeologist Dr. Matteson (Finley) welcomes his freewheeling daughter Genie (Trilling) to Egypt and tells her of Gnostic ruins he has recently unearthed. A curious Genie is soon befriended by the seductive Sabina (Kimhi), in reality the former courtesan of the Marquis de Sade (Englund). Before long, Genie is at the mercy of Sabina and a man named Chevalier (Englund), who plans to torture her and use her for his "evil" pleasures. In the end, ghostly Gnostics weigh in and help Genie escape from her devilish captors.

COMMENTARY: Horror legend Tobe Hooper fires blanks in the

lugubrious *Night Terrors*, a heavy-handed muddle that proves neither thrilling nor erotic (though it was marketed as an "erotic thriller"). Although the film's subject, the Marquis De Sade (1740–1818), is fascinating and worthy of exploration in the horror genre, this film does very little with the character, or even the powerful and to some, alluring concept of sadism.

Robert Englund portrays both the modern Chevalier and the historical De Sade in *Night Terrors*. He plays the former like a modern-day James Bond villain: impeccably dressed, charming and not particularly menacing. He plays the latter with a foppish wig, a white, unseeing eye, and a permanent air of amusement and enjoyment about himself, for some reason.

Night Terrors cross-cuts between De Sade in the past and Trilling's character in Alexandria, Egypt, of the present, but does so in a way that fails to maintain much interest. The underlying theme here, of a dangerous religious cult, proves timely in the 1990s, but *Night Terrors*, doesn't add much to the conversation. The year of *Night Terrors'* release, after all, was the year that radical Islamists bombed the World Trade Center in Manhattan, and also the year of the government's confrontation with David Koresh's cult followers in Waco, Texas.

Otherwise, the film is another "Americans Abroad"-type horror, during which naïve, traditionally-minded Westerners become involved in the horror of another culture (usually Far Eastern or Middle Eastern). *Night Terrors* also features a lot of simulated sex, which indeed makes this one of the decade's "erotic horror" films along the lines of *Sorceress* (1995).

Many Tobe Hooper films admirably shatter taboos and film decorum, but there's little intellectual, stylish gamesmanship at work in this underwhelming film. It's actually a shame to see Hooper's name on it. Even the video box is dishonest. It showcases Englund's screaming face with snakes and frogs erupting from it, like he's a nightmarish master of animal spirits or something. That image indicates a rubber-reality- styled horror, and *Night Terrors* fails to deliver on that. Or much of anything else, for that matter.

***Puppet Master 4: The Demon* * * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Gordon Currie (Rick Myers); Chandra West (Susie); Jason Adams (Cam); Teresa Hill (Lauren); Felton Perry (Dr. Carl Baker); Stacie Randall (Dr. Leslie Piper); Michael Shamus Wiles (Stanley); Dan Zukovic (Delivery Man); Jack McKinnon (Sutekh).

CREW: Full Moon Entertainment presents film by Jeff Burr. *Casting:* Robert McDonald, Perry Bullington. *Puppet Effects:* David Allen. *Special Visual Effects Supervisor:* Michael S. Deaks. *Costume Designer:* Greg Lavoli. *Film Editors:* Mark Manos, Margaret-Ann Smith. *Music:* Richard Band. *Production Designer:* Milo. *Director of Photography:* Adolfo Bartoli. *Produced by:* Charles Band. *Written by:* Douglas Aarniokoski, Steven E. Carr, Jo Duffy, Todd Henshell, Kenneth S. Payson. *Directed by:* Jeff Burr. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 80 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Sutekh (McKinnon), the lord of the Underworld, sends demons to Earth to stop all the scientists toiling on "Omega Project," a venture designed to create artificial intelligence. The demons of the underworld are also unhappy with the late puppet master, Toulon, because he has stolen their secret of immortal life, and they wish it to remain in their purview. At the Bodega Bay Inn, Omega Project scientist Rick Myers (Currie), his girlfriend Susie (West), a psychic (Hill) and a competitor, Cam (Adams), face an ambush by demons from below. The only thing that can save the humans is the revival of Toulon's long-dormant puppets. Toulon passes on his legacy to Rick and instructs him to use the puppets to fight the forces of darkness.

COMMENTARY: I was certain that the makers of the *Puppet Master* films had learned an important lesson after the much-improved *Part 3: Toulon's Revenge*. That film eschewed slasher movie conventions, dropped the hip but insipid young adults, and just told a good "evil vs. evil" story pitting Toulon's puppets against evil Nazis. The film was dramatic and well-performed, especially for the direct-to-video venue.

Puppet Master 4: The Demon begins as though it is going to be equally impressive, suggesting diminutive, spiked demons will come to battle Toulon's puppets to the death. The first attack scene, staged well by director Jeff Burr, is the bloodiest, most violent and most effective scare scene in the entirety of the *Puppet Master* series. It really starts the movie off with a bang.

But then, in relatively short order, the franchise relapses into mediocrity. *Puppet Master 4: The Demon* settles down in the familiar Bodega Bay Inn with four interchangeable young adult lead characters

who are too dumb to leave the premises when things get hairy and who tend to create their own problems (for example: summoning Sutekh's demons with an Egyptian witch board).

It's in these establishing scenes involving the young adults that one begins to realize the drawback of most *Puppet Masters*. It isn't in the plots, which tend to be pretty strong, at least in part 3 and part 4. It isn't in the special effects or visual presentations, which are often inspired though sometimes only competent. No, the problem is in the acting, in the level of the lead performances. The actors here—and it's a relatively small cast—just can't carry the film, at least not in the way that Rolfe, Lynch, Abercrombie, Douglas and Eisenberg carried off the previous entry.

I realize these aren't big budget films, but paying more accomplished actors would have paid off, I suspect, for these films. Once more, whenever the puppets aren't on screen, the whole drama just falls flat. Imagine, just for a second, that Jeffrey Combs was hired to play Rick Myers, and you get a sense of what this film might have been instead.

The Demon's set-up is great (puppet vs. demons) but the script is no great shakes. For instance, consider this scenario: four young adults discover fifty-year-old puppets in a closed-up, abandoned hotel. Using Toulon's journal, they bring the puppets back to life. But then the power goes out at night, and the four human characters just decide to turn in; to return to their separate bedrooms for a good night sleep.

So ... upon discovering and re-animating creepy puppets (one of which has a whirring drill for a head) would you just cavalierly go off to sleep, with no worries?

Wouldn't you at least barricade your door? Or lock up the puppets in one room? Of course, the puppets are not the problem here; they're on the side of right in the war against Sutekh's minions. But the point is that these four people would not know that fact. But they just go to their bedrooms like the world is right.

Clearly, these characters (and one of them is a brilliant scientist) are not the sharpest tools in the shed. One character, Cam (Jason Adams), is worse than even that description suggests: he's the most annoying human being imaginable. At every juncture, he makes the absolute wrong decision, as though some evil puppet master (or screenwriter) is pulling *his* strings, and forcing the narrative in one direction.

Of course—once more—better actors could have made this script work. It's just that this foursome—Gordon Currie, Chandra West, Jason Adams and Theresa Hill—don't have what it takes. Currie has

the most screen-time, and he plays, well, a total dork—one who bounces around playing laser tag with his robots, and then with the puppets, to bad pop music.

Even the new puppet featured in *Puppet Master 4: The Demon* is a bit of a letdown in terms of personality. His name is Decapitron, and his trick is that he features a number of "head" accessories. One head, as we see in the finale, is a weapon that shoots electronic rays. At other points, his unformed head is manipulated by Toulon (a fun effect featuring Guy Rolfe superimposed on the puppet's skull). But because this guy essentially has no face, he has no identity and no personality, at least not in comparison to the other puppets.

Mid-way through *The Demon*, you wonder why this DTV series isn't taking more chances. How about seeing a beloved puppet (like Pinhead) get ripped apart in a pitched battle with a demon? The stakes just don't seem particularly high in this film, and far too much time is spent with the unappealing foursome wandering corridors to check out noises. In the end, it's all just a bit tired. Jeff Burr directed this entry, and in general, he's a director who I believe is underappreciated. His *Leatherface* (1990) is probably somewhat better than many horror fans acknowledge, for instance. But after the first scene, this *Puppet Master* is a failure.

In the last scene of *The Demon*, Guy Rolfe passes the puppet master torch to Gordon Currie's Rick Myers. Believe me, this is not a good omen of things to come.

. *Return of the Living Dead III* * * *

Critical Reception

"For my money, one of the standout gore flicks of its era. During a time when horror was retreating into much tamer territory, this third installment takes the series out of the realm of comedy, playing things straight for the first time. Nothing in here to touch the brilliance of the classic original, but the image of pierced zombie Julie comes close."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Mindy Clarke (Julie Walker); J. Trevor Edmond (Kurt Reynolds); Kent McCord (John Reynolds); Sarah Douglas (Lt. Colonel Sinclair); James T. Callahan (Col. Peck); Mike Moroff (Santus); Sal Lopez (Filipe); Fabio Urena (Mogo); Pia Reyes (Alicia); Dana Lee (Store Owner); Jill Andre (Chief Scientist); Basil Wallace (Riverman).

CREW: Trimark Pictures Presents in association with Bandai Visual Col, Ltd./Ozla Pictures Inc., a Brian Yuzna Film. *Casting:* Jeffrey Passero. *Music:* Barry Goldberg. *Production Designer:* Anthony Tremblay. *Film Editor:* Christopher Roth. *Director of Photography:* Gerry Lively. *Co-Producer:* Andrew Hersh. *Associate Producer:* John Penney. *Executive Producers:* Roger Burlage, Lawrence Steven Meyers. *Written by:* John Penney. *Produced by and directed by:* Brian Yuzna. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two love-struck teens—Kurt (Edmond) and Julie (Clarke)—break into the military installation where Kurt's Dad, John (McCord), is working on a project to contend with the zombification effects of the deadly Trioxin compound. Kurt plans to run off with Julie when he learns his dad is relocating the family to Oklahoma City, but Julie is killed in a motorcycle accident. Refusing to be separated from the love of his life, Kurt exposes Julie to the Trioxin gas and brings her back to life. Together, they embark upon a night of terror.

COMMENTARY: *Return of the Living Dead III* is a haunting love story and a powerful excavation of the 1990s youth culture, known as Generation X (those born between the years 1961 and 1981). Though hindered by a low budget, *Return of the Living Dead III* impresses because it remains committed to its dark tale and doesn't shy away from questions regarding death.

Generation X came of age in a time of difficulty for America. Many youngsters of this demographic witnessed the end of the deeply unpopular Vietnam War, the Watergate Scandal, the Energy Crisis, the accident at Three Mile Island, and the seemingly unending hostage situation in Iran. In the eighties, this generation saw an economic recession, the Chernobyl nuclear accident and the arrival of the sexually-transmitted AIDS plague just as it was about to become sexually active itself (a kind of sexual revolution in reverse).

The most popular movies of this generation were slasher films—films about surviving a gauntlet of unstoppable, irrational forces of nature like Jason or Michael. And the music of this generation was the

so-called death metal of the late 1980s and early 1990s, music that was tied, quite unfairly, at least on some occasions with Satanism.

By the 1990s, Generation X knew it couldn't trust science, politicians, religion, or other traditional pillars of American community. Accordingly, the cynicism deepened, and several new, perhaps disturbing, trends were mainstreamed. Prime among these was body piercing, the puncturing and cutting of the human body so as to insert jewelry. Body piercing, in part, was done to express individuality, rebellion, and enhance sexual pleasure. The music of the decade was even more death obsessed, if you consider Marilyn Manson (Marilyn Monroe + Charles Manson = Marilyn Manson), whose first album, *Portrait of an American Family* was released early in the decade.

The nineties brought economic uncertainty and increased cynicism to Generation X, a so-called "reactive" generation, and you can see it all played out explicitly in *Return of the Living Dead III*. The film is decidedly anti-authority, and the U.S. military, responsible for god knows how many Trioxin disasters, is the symbol of establishment and the symbol of the enemy.

Most dramatically, the film features a heroine, Julie (Mindy Clarke), who comes to embody the youth culture of the time. Cynical about government, religion, patriotism and other core aspects of the American experience, she is a girl fascinated instead with the experiences of the flesh. For instance, the film depicts her, early on, running a lighter's open flame over her hand. Later, she sensuously licks the magnet stripe of a security key card to make it work. She is a creature of the body.

Similarly, Julie is obsessed with death and its connection to the flesh. After sneaking into a military lab and witnessing the resurrection of a corpse, she engages in passionate sex with Kurt. She keeps replaying what she saw at the lab as a kind of mental aphrodisiac, speculating what it is like to be dead, to literally embrace death. A vision in combat boots, fishnet stockings and cut-off shorts, this crimson haired, green-eyed beauty is the epitome of Generation X's death-obsession.



Julie Walker (Mindy Clarke) is a zombie and a 1990s teen fashion statement in *Return of the Living Dead III* (1993).

After Julie dies in a motorcycle crash (a romantic way to die, in some sense), Kurt revives her using the Trioxin. Upon awaking, Julie seems to equate the experience of dying to an extreme sports event, like bungee jumping (another 1990s trend). She says, "That was incredible. Let's do it again."

Later, as a zombie, Julie retains her personality and psychology, and comes to realize that by piercing her dead flesh, the pain makes her hunger for brains go away. In her zombie form, Julie also expresses angst. "I'm not dead. I'm not alive. I'm just so lonely," she says. Unable to believe in religion, government, science or patriotism, she has nothing to hold onto. So instead, she focuses on pain (the equivalent of holding onto the death culture, to music groups like The Silent Majority, which is depicted in the film via a poster for the album *Life, Sex and Death*.)

Finally, Julie takes the ultimate step, making her death a fashion statement and a statement of personal philosophy. In pale blue light, we see cut-aways of her transformation, her ascendance. She becomes death. We see chains rip skin. We see nails perforate her arms. Glass shards pad her shoulders. Julie emerges as a sensual, spiked testament to a generation's obsession with death. In the same moment, she becomes a horror icon of the 1990s: gorgeous and lethal.

What *Return of the Living Dead III* seems to suggest then, is pain, body piercing, and death as legitimate alternatives to life in a country that has lapsed into a kind of sickness of spirit. In the movie's

incendiary ending, Julie and Kurt walk hand-in-hand into an incinerator together. Flames engulf them, and then the frame itself. These American teens have found peace in death and peace in their togetherness rather than in the continuance of a life that seems devoid of purpose. For some people, pain is the only thing that makes the hunger (for a more meaningful life?) go away. For some people, death is a fashion statement. Death is an exit (in a world with "no exit," as the film's alleyway signage indicates). Death is also a protest.

Return of the Living Dead III mirrors the context of the youth culture in early 1990s America with canny accuracy. Kurt—long in denial—tells Julie that everything will be great once they relocate to Seattle, ground zero for the 1990s grunge movement. But Julie replies honestly, "I can't keep pretending. I don't feel the same." She can't be what society and Kurt want her to be.

In true living dead fashion, *Return of the Living Dead 3* also looks at zombies and asks question about them. Julie maintains her intelligence and sense of self as a zombie and proposes that "the living dead aren't just animated flesh ... they have an inner life." This is a point worthy of George Romero. How we, as human beings, treat the dead tells us a lot about who we are as the living. Julie finds some meaning in her undead life, fighting for the rights of those like her. This is something new to Generation X too, a sense of activism in the world rather than spiraling inward and down.

Return of the Living Dead III is a bold movie (and one that edges around some of the very ideas that came to dominate David Fincher's *Fight Club* in 1999) and one filled with great ideas, not to mention copious amounts of gore. The material here involving a local gang is weak and unnecessary, and ditto with the homeless nutcase who befriends Julie and Kurt.

Return of the Living Dead III also pulls one punch, perhaps in the name of good taste. Kurt and Julie, as a zombie, don't get around to making love on camera. Still, it should have done so. Good horror is about shattering taboos, about obliterating movie and societal decorum, and if ever there was a legitimate thematic reason for a human/zombie love scene, it's here.

Still, when *Return of the Living Dead III* sticks to its theme, of a youth culture's willing embrace of the dark, it sizzles.

***Skeeter* * . (DTV)**

CAST: Tracy Griffith (Sarah); Jim Youngs (Boone); Charles Napier (Ernie Buckler); Jay Robinson (Drake); William Sanderson (Gordon); Eloy Casados (Tucker); John Putch (Hamilton); Saxon Trainor (Dr. Jill Wyle); Stacy Edwards (Mary Ann); Michael J. Pollard (Hopper); George Buck Flower (Filo); John F. Goff (Clay); Michael D'Agosta (Bo); Eric Lawson (Frank); Lindsay Fisher (Chrissy); Joe McCutcheon (Will); Barbara Baldavin (Dorothy); Robert Snively (Luther); Jane Abbott (Esther).

CREW: New Line Cinema and August Entertainment presents a Team Players, K.A.R. Film production. *Casting:* Joseph D'Agosta. *Production Designer:* Stella Wong. *Film Editor:* Ed Hansen. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* Frank H. Isaacs. *Music:* David Lawrence. *Director of Photography:* John Lambert. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Doug Edwards. *Written by:* Kanny Horn, Clark Brandon. *Based on a story idea by:* Joe Rubin. *Produced by:* James Glenn Dudelson Kelly Andrew Rubin, John Lambert. *Directed by:* Clark Brandon. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the western town of Clear Sky, giant mosquitoes go on the attack, killing a boy on a motorbike and his father. The town police are in thrall to a local developer, the evil Drake (Robinson), whose toxic spills are the source of the overgrown mosquitoes. Renegade cop Boone (Youngs), his Indian deputy friend, Tucker (Casados), and his girlfriend, Sarah (Griffith), fight the mosquitoes with the help of an E.P.A. inspector, William Sanderson (Gordon), and find the mosquitoes' nesting grounds inside an abandoned mine.

COMMENTARY: *Skeeter* hopes to be a *Kingdom of the Spiders* (1977) for the nineties but is largely undone in this worthy quest by a lugubrious pace and a laidback approach to genre storytelling. The first on-screen mosquito kill doesn't arrive until after thirty long, meandering minutes and overall there's a sense of ennui to the proceedings. One subplot, featuring Michael J. Pollard as a man who lets his pets— *the over-sized mosquitoes*— drain blood from his arms, goes absolutely nowhere.

What *Skeeter* does feature, however, is a message that preaches against big business interests in the arena of land development. This is relevant to the age. In the decade of Clinton there was an "over" building phenomenon involving commercial space, and an increase in

the construction of apartments and multiple dweller buildings because the median price of a home continued to soar.

Specifically, the evil Drake, TV's *Dr. Shrinker* himself, Jay Robinson, is a greedy developer in *Skeeter* who wants the town of Clear Sky for his own insidious purposes. Accordingly, protagonists are wont to make declaratory statements such as "life is being sucked out of this town," or "this town is dying, faster than any of you would believe." These comments, I should note, apply equally to Drake and the gigantic, breeding mosquitoes.

It's this commendable anti-corporate message that seems to interest the filmmakers the most, so much so that when the final battle between flame throwers and mosquitoes arrives, it's anti-climactic. With the mosquitoes down and out, the film's final scene lingers on the heroic local lawman, Boone, standing over a ridge that is being stripped and developed by Drake. He lingers there for a long time, makes a stand, and decides to stay. This is his town, and he's not leaving. *The fight with Drake will be joined...*

Again, *Skeeter* offers a noble sentiment and social consciousness, making it a kind of *The Last Picture Show* of giant bug movies, but again and again, you wish it would just make with the horror. Director Clark Brandon frequently positions his camera low to the ground, granting viewers a wide angle look at the landscape, and it's an effective visual. It's just that nothing much happens on that landscape. And that fact, coupled with some cheesy scenes between a "limp-dick" boyfriend and his slutty girlfriend, don't add to the film's overall tapestry. As for the mosquitoes, they splatter against windshields in convincing, gory fashion. But when on-screen too long, they tend to look phony and non-ambulatory. When sucking blood the giant bugs just appear to be tacked on to their victims, and that adds an unwanted element of humor. *Skeeter's* final battle makes extensive use of rear projection and spedup footage, but never seems impressive.

You get the feeling watching *Skeeter* that director Clark Brandon really wanted to make a Western instead. He's got a great villain in the big city rich man, Drake, and a macho lawman in the athletically-built, strong but silent Young. The story itself involves homeowners forced to give up their ranches, shoot-outs with Drake's thugs, and a discussion of who really "owns" the land. The mosquito stuff all feels tacked on by comparison.

Maybe this should have been called *Dances with Mosquitoes*.

***Subspecies 2: Bloodstone* * * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Anders Hove (Radu); Denice Duff (Michelle); Kevin Blair (Mel); Melanie Shatner (Rebecca); Pamela Gordon (Mummy); Michael Denish (Popescu); Ion Haiduc (Lt. Marin); Viorel Sergovici (Rocker); Tudorel Filmon, Viorel Comanici (Athene Palace Desk Clerks); Cutalina Margea (Maid); Norman Cabrera (Lead Singer Rocker); Wayne Toth (Lead Guitar Singer).

CREW: Full Moon Entertainment Presents a Ted Nicolau Film: *Casting:* Robert MacDonald, Perry Bullington. *Production Designer:* Radu Corciova. *Art Director:* Ioan Corciova. *Costume Designer:* Oana Paunescu. *Special Make-up Effects:* Alchemy Effects, Michael S. Deak, Wayne Toth. *Film Editor:* Bert Glatstein. *Music:* Richard Kosinski, Michael Portis, John Zeretske. Performed by the Aman Folk Orchestra. *Based on an original idea by:* Charles Band. *Director of Photography:* Vlad Parnescu. *Executive Producer:* Charles Band. *Produced by:* Vlad and Oana Parnescu. *Written and directed by:* Ted Nicolaou. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 83 minutes.

P.O.V.: "Whatever's going on here, it's not a fairy tale."—Rebecca contextualizes Radu's life in *Subspecies 2: Bloodstone*

SYNOPSIS: In Romania, the evil vampire Radu (Hove) is resurrected and kills his brother Stefan, but Stefan's consort, the half-vampire Michelle (Duff), escapes and flees to Bucharest with the coveted relic known as the bloodstone. Radu pursues and meets up in Bucharest with his desiccated Mommy, Mummy (Gordon). Meanwhile, Michelle's sister, Rebecca (Shatner), arrives in Romania to help her sister before she becomes a full-fledged vampire. When Rebecca is captured by Radu, Michelle must decide if she is to retain her humanity or submit to the undead will of Radu.

COMMENTARY: Ander Hove's pigment-challenged Romanian vampire, Radu, must be the most singularly hapless villain in undead movie history. As *Subspecies 2: Bloodstone* opens, Radu is resurrected by miniature, stop-motion demons, and then he quickly kills his competitor, Stefan, for the vampire throne. But before he can acquire the all-important bloodstone, the dawn comes and the exposed Radu has to flee back to his dungeon. Talk about bad timing.

Later in the film, just as Radu is about to bite slumbering Melanie Shatner on the thigh, the telephone by her bedside rings and wakes her up. Radu slinks away, denied his prize.

It doesn't help matters either that Radu is constantly and inexplicably depicted drooling blood. Or that he possesses oversized Mickey Mouse hands. Or that the raspy-voiced vampire is prone to over-the-top and mustache-twirling dialogue. After he smashes Stefan to powdery bones, for instance, Radu throws a bona fide temper tantrum in the crypt, glares at the ashes of his brother and declares: "You will suffer horribly for this!"

Looks like he's already suffered horribly... All sarcasm aside, *Subspecies 2: Bloodstone* represents a step up from its underwhelming and inexplicably popular direct-to-video predecessor. The sequel's primary strengths are identical, however. In particular, authentic location shooting in Romania and local actors in critical supporting roles forge the impression that this world of vampires is real and not studio or stage bound.

Yet this film is also stronger than *Subspecies* because it is better paced and better visualized. Several compositions featuring the shadow of Radu pursuing Michelle through nighttime Bucharest are evocative of *Nosferatu* (1922), menacing, and beautifully-orchestrated, if a tad over lit. Also, there are long stretches of the film featuring no dialogue, just pure visual storytelling, and that too feels like a nice nod to the silent progenitor of the vampire form. And, simply put, if these visuals didn't work, we wouldn't care about the characters or their plight.

Surprisingly, you'll find yourself caring about both.

The two female leads in *Subspecies 2: Bloodstone* are strong and, unlike the first film, actually distinguishable from one another. Denice Duff now portrays Michelle Morgan rather than Laura Tate, and her tragic story-arc forges a connection with the audience. Duff does well with the part of a reluctant vampire whose hunger for blood is blossoming, and her subplot takes her to a Romanian nightclub to scout for victims before her human half re-asserts itself.

Melanie Shatner also registers strongly as Rebecca, Michelle's sister. She's a more intelligent and curious heroine than we've been given so far in the series, and a welcome addition.

The special effects also seem stronger in this sequel, with even the goofy little demons— *which remain a strange distraction and far afield from the central narrative*— moving about more convincingly. You have to admire the gusto of director Ted Nicolaou, ending his low-budget vampire film in epic, cliffhanger-style; at the very moment

of greatest danger for Michelle and Rebecca.

There's enough energy here, going out, that I actually started to look forward to *Subspecies* 3. Still, I wish this movie had been titled *Subspecies 2: Your Sister Is a Vampire* because it actually would have been an accurate reflection of the film's plotline.

***The Temp** * * .*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Timothy Hutton (Peter Derns); Lara Flynn Boyle (Kris Bolin); Dwight Schultz (Roger Jasser); Oliver Platt (Jack Hartsell); Steven Weber (Brad Montroe); Colleen Flynn (Sara Meinhold); Faye Dunaway (Charlene Towne); Scott Coffey (Lance); Dakin Matthews (Dr. Feldman); Maura Tierney (Sharon Derns); Lin Shaye (Rosemary); Michael Winters (Mercer); Danny Swanson (Nathan Derns); Demere E. Hall (Marla).

CREW: Paramount Pictures presents a David Permut Production, a film by Tom Holland. *Casting:* Elizabeth Leustig, Judith Holstra. *Music:* Frederic Talgorn. *Film Editor:* Scott Conrad. *Production Designer:* Joel Schiller. *Director of Photography:* Steve Yaconelli. *Executive Producer:* Howard W. Koch, Jr. *Story by:* Kevin Falls, Tom Engelman. *Screenplay by:* Kevin Falls. *Produced by:* David Permut, Tom Engelman. *Directed by:* Tom Holland. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

P.O.V.: "Where is it everyone wants to go in the nineties, gang? Does anybody know? Back to the fifties. *Back to the basics*. Back to a simpler time."— An ad-pitch in Tom Holland's *The Temp*

SYNOPSIS: Peter Derns (Hutton), an advertising whiz recovering from a bout of paranoia, needs help at the office when his secretary's wife goes into labor so he hires a temp. At first, the beautiful and efficient Kris (Flynn Boyle) is just what the disorganized Derns needs, but soon she proves to be ambitious, and possibly murderous. After Kris sabotages Peter's reconciliation attempt with his wife, Sharon (Tierney), and following the apparently-accidental death of an office

competitor (Platt) by bee sting, Peter begins to look into Kris's work and personal history.

COMMENTARY: The interloper is the villain of *The Temp*, a wily and sexy trespasser named Kris who asserts herself into the life of a hapless protagonist, here a laid-back co-worker named Peter. For Kris, murder is simply one more "skill" in her on-the-job arsenal, and she shares a problem in common with most interlopers in the 1990s: no *appropriate sense of boundaries*. Although hobbled by a diffident and anti-climactic final scene, *The Temp* at least features a memorable villain. The movie isn't half bad, thanks to director Holland's horror movie chops, and a screenplay which focuses explicitly on context of the 1990s workplace.

The Temp offers a lot of commentary on the environment in the decade of Clinton. This was the era of ergonomic chairs, no-smoking rules, and the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993. At least on the surface, these protections were designed to keep workers from encountering anything more serious on the job than carpal tunnel syndrome, the affliction of many keyboard jockeys. Yet the facts suggest something infinitely more sinister. The average work week for salaried employees in the 1990s increased on average to between 43 to 47 hours, and a whopping eight weeks a year more than Western European counterparts. As Kris notes in the film, "We marry our jobs, Peter. I want to make sure I marry the right job."

At the same time that Americans were working longer hours in the nineties, there was also a dramatic uptick in workplace violence (after a decrease in the 1980s). In the 1990s, there were approximately twenty homicides a week and one million assaults a year reported, according to figures from Health and Human Services in 1996.

Workplace violence became so common -place in the 1990s, in fact, that it became known by the slang term "going postal" circa 1993. The term became even more popular after it was used in the Alicia Silverstone comedy *Clueless* in 1995. Originally the violent act of "going postal" was connected to post office workers who snapped and committed on-the-job violence, but soon it was applied to all professions in all walks of life.

Given the increased amount of time that Americans spent at work during the decade, and also the increased amount of violence, *The Temp* is perfectly positioned to exploit the issues of the work place, and that's pretty much what it does. Faye Dunaway's character captures the Zeitgeist when she declares: "Don't be fooled by company

daycare centers and in-house yoga breaks. People still stomp on your toes and stab you in the back, just like they did in the eighties. Now they just smile when they do it."

The business-world one-upmanship is carried to ludicrous extremes in *The Temp* with not just murder on the agenda, but corporate espionage going on behind the scenes. It's made all the more ludicrous by the fact that the "company" in question ... sells cookies. There's nothing here in the national interest, no matters that should involve life and death, but the environment is entirely one of "negative publicity" and "political infighting." Again, that's an indictment of American business of the era, in which competition goes to extremes. In *The Temp*, there's literally blood in the cookie dough.

As is the case in the best of the interloper horror movies of the 1990s, the victim of the interloper is not exactly blameless. In *Cape Fear*, Nolte's lawyer was a sleaze who broke the law. In *Single White Female*, Bridget Fonda's character was an indulged, nosy "only child" who couldn't share. Here, Timothy Hutton's Peter is a paranoid who first views Kris almost entirely in terms of her sexuality. The film's visuals represent his leering, Good Old Boy mentality. The first shot of Kris is a lascivious look at her long, shapely legs. They are so long and shapely, in fact, that they render Peter (in close-up) clumsy, speechless and confused. Then Peter looks down Kris's blouse during their first meeting and we get a shot of her ample cleavage.

It's called subtlety, Peter. Get a clue.

Peter's obvious leering doesn't go unnoticed by Kris, and, well, she uses her appearance to her advantage. In 1990s parlance, she "works it." Peter never sexually harasses Kris, but the sexism of the American workplace is part of the background here, and again, this was the era of the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill sexual harassment kerfuffle. Peter is outmaneuvered because he's transgressed by thinking only of sex. By contrast, Kris gets it right, understanding that this isn't about sex, but about power ... but about the job.

Sex is just a means to corporate power.

The Temp gets confused and stupid in its third act. It attempts to build a convincing case that Kris wasn't the murderer involved in all the killings, but that it was Faye Dunaway's character all along ... battling ageism. Since the audience already knows that Kris's previous employer died under suspicious circumstances, and we have also seen her viciously sabotage Peter both on the job and at home with his wife, this development never quite rings true. When the film winds back to the obvious (but seemingly tacked on) conclusion that Kris is indeed a murderer, it plays as a last gasp instead of a legitimate

denouement. Peter—now triumphant—politely calls Security and asks the department to escort Kris off the premises.

That's it. No final battle. No shots of Kris rotting in jail. No tussle. Nothing

That's a big disappointment, no doubt, but the first two acts of *The Temp* showcase a great interloper, and Lara Flynn Boyle does a terrific job playing the ingratiating, grasping, manipulative villain. Her every move is calculated for maximum effect and Kris divides and conquers with great aplomb. She plays her hand so well, and the paranoid Peter plays his hand so poorly, that you want to pull your hair out. When an interloper movie elicits that level of reaction, you know that it's working on some level.

"She has a hidden agenda!" one character yells hopelessly, convinced of Kris's duplicity. Indicting the American business world, that cry is answered with another even more damning.

"Don't we all?!"

***To Sleep with a Vampire* * * . (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Scott Valentine (Vampire); Charlie Spradling (Nina); Richard Zobel (Cabby); Ingrid Void (Stripper #1); Stephanie Harder (Stripper #2); Kristine Rose (Prom Queen); Cole McKay (Skinhead #1); Kurt Lott (Skinhead #2); Michael Sarna (Drunk); Jose Andrews (Drunk #2); George Ceres (Sheriff).

CREW: New Concorde presents a film by Adam Friedman.
Castings: Andrew Hertz. *Music:* Nigel Holton. *Production Designer:* Stuart Blatt. *Film Editor:* Lorne Morris. *Director of Photography:* Michael Crain. *Written by:* Patricia Harrington. *Produced by:* Michael Elliott. *Executive Producer:* Roger Corman. *Directed by:* Adam Friedman. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 73 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A lonely vampire (Valentine) brings a troubled stripper, Nina (Spradling), back to his apartment one night and warns her that he shall feed upon her at 6: 00 A.M. Leading up to that dawn deadline, Nina and the vampire go from distrust and fear to friendship, understanding and even intimacy. As the dawn comes, the

vampire and Nina have a final reckoning.

COMMENTARY: *To Sleep with a Vampire* is apparently an uncredited remake of another Roger Corman production, 1989's *Dance of Death*. That fact aside, this Adam Friedman film is the 1990s, DTV horror equivalent of Richard Linklater's brilliant *Before Sunrise* (1995).

There, an American man (Ethan Hawke) and French woman (Julie Delpy) spend all night walking the streets of Vienna, discussing everything about themselves and their lives, before a separation at dawn.

In *To Sleep with a Vampire*, the vampire (Scott Valentine) and the exotic dancer, Nina (Charlie Spardling), undergo a night of shared experiences. They visit Nina's son (now in the custody of another family) and go to a bar for drinks. They visit a local beach so the vampire can experience it for the first time, and so on. All this leads up to dawn, when the vampire and Nina must decide about their individual and collective fate. In both films, the respective couples also have sexual intercourse.

Unlike *Before Sunrise*, however, *To Sleep with a Vampire* tends to cross the line from romantic to pretentious. Some of the dialogue is so purple it's actually cringe-inducing. For instance, the vampire wants to hear about sunlight and daytime, and asks, sincerely, what it's like to have a "friend." Still, in the scheme of things, it's no more emo than *Twilight* (2008), or the biggest romantic flick of the 1990s, James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997). Cheese and tragic love often walk hand-in-hand in the cinema.

Director Friedman approaches the material with great seriousness, and for that we can indeed be grateful. He creates some artistic transitions (including one with a toy car), and the lead actors, within clearly limited parameters, imbue the material with sincerity and humanity. You'll find yourself involved in the film despite its limitations.

And truthfully, maybe that's what separates *To Sleep with a Vampire* from some of its more ambitious DTV brethren. It understands that not every horror movie has to be an extravaganza, that a limited budget may limit special effects but it need not limit creativity. This movie is essentially a dramatic play with two characters and few settings.

Sure, audiences could probably do without the symbolism of the white balloons (which float heavenward at sunrise, representing the ascent of Jacob the vampire's doomed soul), but these characters are

drawn clearly and powerfully enough that the film passes its running time easily.

Even without special effects, Friedman manages to create a chill or two. There's a fun moment in which Nina attempts to flee Jacob on a motorcycle, but he keeps re-appearing ahead of her, down the road. It's creepy (like *Twilight Zone's* classic "The Hitchhiker") and it's all done with clever editing rather than gimmicky visuals.

Occasionally, *To Sleep with a Vampire* runs out of steam. There are two silly incidents in which the vampire is required to battle obnoxious drunks/gang members, and it's not just repetitious ... it's unnecessary. The key to the story is the relationship between Nina and Jacob, and for the most part the movie gets that.

One scene is actually authentically haunting. Nina was not allowed to see her son for his birthday, so the vampire takes her to see him. The scene starts with a pan across the boy's playroom, and all the signs of boyhood/childhood are there, forging an atmosphere of innocence far from the world of the isolated vampire. Then, when Nina speaks to her son, believing she will never see him again, the movie actually generates a sense of pathos. This is entirely unexpected and surprisingly moving.

Friedman also does a good job of maintaining the underlying tension. He occasionally cuts back to the old clock on Jacob the Vampire's mantel, a visual reminder that night is fleeting and a bloody dawn looms. When dawn does finally come, and Jacob brings Nina back to his apartment to feed, Friedman cuts to an extreme, disconcerting high angle, and our eyes understand that doom awaits one of these characters.

To Sleep with a Vampire is over-arty at times and a shade too pretentious to be judged a success, but it's the rare DTV effort from the 1990s that errs by appealing to something other than the lowest common denominator. There are no quipping fairy tale monsters here, no rambunctious *Aliens* or *Jurassic Park* rip-offs. It's just a movie about a vampire and a stripper getting to know each other, and oddly, that'll do in a pinch.

The Unnamable II: The Statement of Randolph Carter

*** * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: John Rhys-Davies (Professor Warren); Mark Kinsey Stephenson (Randolph Carter); Charles Klausmeyer (Eliot Damon Howard); Maria Ford (Alyda Winthrop); Julie Strain (Creature); Shawn T. Lim (Robert Barger); Siobhan Mc-Cafferty (Debbie Leach); David Warner (Chancellor Thayer); Kevin Alber (Jack Herman); August West (Mary Wilkinson); Kit Fredericks (The Unnamable); Bryan Clark (Professor Thurber); Chuck Butto (Officer Joe Choate); Mike Gordon (Joshua Winthrop); Sasha Jenson (Irate Student); Gary Pike (Professor Mendez).

CREW: Lions Gate Home Entertainment, Yankee Classic Pictures in association with An East Production and Prism, New Age Entertainment present a film adapted from H.P. Lovecraft, by Jean-Paul Ouellette. *Casting:* Kevin Albert. *Executive Producers:* Kris Gee, Phil Grace, Ron Gate, David Blake. *Directors of Photography:* Greg Gardner, Roger Olkowski. *Film Editor:* William C. Williams. *Line Producer:* Russell D. Markowitz. *Make-up Special Effects by:* R. Christopher Biggs Productions. *Music:* David Bergeaud. *Based on "The Statement of Randolph Carter" and "The Unnamable" by:* H.P. Lovecraft. *Co-Producer:* Alex Durrell. *Produced and directed by:* Jean-Paul Ouellette. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 104 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Local authorities and officials at Miskatonic University attempt to cover up the truth about a 300-year-old demon, claiming that wild dogs are responsible for the deaths of several students. Meanwhile, Randolph Carter (Stephenson) wants to use an ancient Necronomicon to stop the supernatural beast haunting Winthrop House. Using the book, Professor Warren (Davies) and the cowardly Eliot(Klausmeyer) are able to separate the monster out of a human female body ... the body of lovely and sweet Aldya (Ford), Winthrop's daughter.

COMMENTARY: This sequel to the 1988 video hit *The Unnamable* is about on a par with the previous Lovecraft-inspired film. Like its predecessor, *The Unnamable II* does not feature the assured visual style and narrative confidence of a Hammer Film or *Sleepy Hollow* (1999) that such an atmospheric story would seem to demand. And furthermore, the acting and writing are distinctly second-rate. Still, as a "B" movie of the DTV variety, *The Unnamable II* is not entirely horrible, either.

In fact, *The Unnamable II* evidences a rather nifty approach to its storyline. It uses a scientific concept (quantum physics) to forge an

authentic Gothic atmosphere. In Gothic literature, this conceit is sometimes called "the explained supernatural," and it relies on the use of science to make something supernatural plausible or real. In the case of *The Unnamable II*, Alyda is "occupied," shall we say, by two identities in one physical body at the same time. One identity is monstrous; one is human. Professor Warren and Randolph Carter separate the two distinctive entities using insulin, but the idea of a woman with two faces (one repellant, one beautiful) is entirely evocative of the Gothic aesthetic.

Other Gothic elements include the idea of an ancestral curse, in this case Alyda's three-hundred-year-old prison stint inside the body of the monster, and the movie's obsession with the ruins of an old civilization or structure side-by-side with the real or new. Here, Professor Warren even notes in a subterranean crypt the presence of the ancient language of Cthulhu.

On the downside, the movie spends so much time in subterranean caves (using point-of-view shots) that I experienced unpleasant flashbacks of *Grim* (1996).

Where *The Unnamable II* proves most Gothic, perhaps, and certainly most affecting, is in its unexpectedly effective finale. Here, the now-human Alyda—once cursed by her father—ages three hundred years before Carter's eyes, becoming a white-haired old crone. Alyda has been rendered human again, but also, alas, her true age. Thus there's a tragic air of doom about the tale. Carter learns that with knowledge comes personal consequences.

The Unnamable II features a decent action scene set among the library book stacks of Miskatonic University, and a chase through an oversized vent shaft too. Otherwise, the film is not distinguished in terms of visuals or set-pieces. Alyda (Ford) does, however, spend much of the film's running time nude.

That's not a Gothic touch by the way, it's a Hollywood one.

The Vanishing * * *

Critical Reception

"Sluizer is badly hobbled here by Todd Graff's version of the story. Graff's screenplay almost seems intended as an object lesson, an example of how Big Bad Hollywood, mass-minded,

grinds up discriminating material and spits it out as pop pulp."—Stanley Kauffman, *The New Republic*, "The Same, Only Different," Volume 208, Issue 10, March 8, 1993, pages 28–29

"If you're really bored and the weather is wretched, you can sit through *The Vanishing* for the sake of Peter Suschitzky's cinematography."—Stuart Klawans, *The Nation*, March 8, 1993, page 317

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jeff Bridges (Barney); Kiefer Sutherland (Jeff); Nancy Travis (Rita); Sandra Bullock (Diane); Park Overall (Lynn); Maggie Linderman (Denise); Lisa Eichhorn (Helene); George Hearn (Arthur); Lynn Hamilton (Miss Carmichael).

CREW: 20th Century–Fox presents a Morra, Brezner, Steinberg and Tenenbaum Production, a George Sluizer film. *Casting:* Risa Bramon Garcia, Joel Bestrop. *Costume Designer:* Durinda Wood. *Music:* Jerry Goldsmith. *Film Editor:* Bruce Green. *Production Designer:* Jeannine C. Oppewall. *Director of Photography:* Peter Suschitzky. *Co-Producer:* Todd Graff. *Executive Producer:* Pieter Jan Brugge, Lauren Weissman. *Based upon the novel The Golden Egg by:* Tim Krabbe. *Written by:* Todd Graff. *Produced by:* Larry Brezner, Paul Schiff. *Directed by:* George Sluizer. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 107 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After a quarrel on their vacation, Diane (Bullock) and Jeff (Sutherland) reconcile at a gas station. But then Diane disappears without a trace, and a desperate Jeff spends three years trying to find her. A strange man named Barney (Bridges) confronts Jeff and tells him that he can show him what happened to Diane, but that he must experience what she experienced. Jeff agrees, unaware that his assertive new girlfriend, Rita (Travis), is not about to let him go the way of Diane.

COMMENTARY: Almost two decades ago, Dutch film director George Sluizer was afforded a rare opportunity, but one fraught with pitfalls and landmines. In short, he directed the same cinematic thriller twice: first the original *Spoorloos* or *The Vanishing*, released in America in 1991, and then the Americanized 1993 remake, also titled *The Vanishing* and starring Kiefer Sutherland, Sandra Bullock and Jeff

Bridges.

While crafting his remake of *The Vanishing* for American audiences, there must have been a point at which director George Sluizer was asked—in the style of his *dramatis personae*—whether it was predestined that this remake should tell the exact same story as the original film, right down to an identical and downbeat finale. This problem gets to the very heart of the remake conundrum. Is a remake an exact copy? Or a variation on a theme?



A promotional poster for the American remake of *The Vanishing* (1993). Center: Jeff Bridges. Upper left: Keifer Sutherland. Lower Right: Nancy Travis.

Having told his story once one way, was it necessary for Sluizer to tell it the same way again? Or did he have wiggle room to go a different way?

American commercial interests would demand, for instance, that the hero in the remake, played by Sutherland, survive. And

furthermore that the villain, played by Jeff Bridges, face punishment and even death.

The original film used the metaphor of a stick bug to describe the film's sociopath, a man who appears to be a typical man, but is in fact, an unfeeling monster. Like the stick bug, he is camouflaged, unnoticed amongst us. If his plan fails—if he is defeated—that metaphor doesn't hold quite as powerfully because he no longer goes unnoticed by society; he is vanquished by it instead. So that's a concern about the Americanized happy ending.

In addition to altering the film's ending, the American version of *The Vanishing* penned by Todd Graff adds a great deal of weight to the character of Jeff's new girlfriend, Rita (Travis). A kind of sullen, bump-on-a-log in the original Dutch version, this upgraded girlfriend character of the remake is far more American, far more assertive, and much more domineering. In fact, she's downright egotistical.

While spying on Jeff, for instance, Rita attempts to crack his computer password and, for some reason, she thinks it could be her own name. Now, here's a man obsessed with the disappearance of his previous girlfriend, Diane—to the point that he's been asked to write a book about the experience of losing her—and this woman thinks she's password-worthy material in the context of his life? Talk about having a healthy ego.

At another juncture, Rita actually dresses up as the missing Diane to make a point to Jeff about how he takes her for granted, which is not merely insensitive, but downright cruel given that Diane is missing and likely dead. Sensitivity is not Rita's strong suit.

Yet, the screenplay places great importance on Rita. Thus in this version of the material, Sluizer provides a third important personality to balance out the emotional hero (Jeff) and the emotionless sociopath (Barney). And importantly, this character, Rita, also battles the memory of Diane as strongly as she comes to battle Barney.

Is this a change from *Spoorloos*? Certainly. But it is not one that *a priori* disqualifies the remake from being a good film in its own right. It is clear, rather, that this remake treads the "variation on a theme" route. In some ways, the revamp works quite well. For instance, in the Dutch original, we have no idea how Rex and Lienneke get together and it doesn't seem quite plausible.

In fact, it's virtually impossible to imagine the sullen, internally-driven character, Rex, actually initiating a romantic relationship with another woman after what has occurred to Saskia. Here, the remake goes to great lengths to show the audience how and why Rita enters Jeff's life. This is a new and critical element, at least in terms of

narrative and theme and must be considered in any review of the film as a whole. Rita changes things dramatically.

Ultimately it is Rita's human connection to Jeff that saves him from Barney. Rita weaves for her boyfriend the fate he isn't strong enough to weave for himself. She resorts to kidnapping, violence, lies and more to do so.

By contrast, the soft-hearted Jeff seems incapable of all these things.

The dramatic upshot: we get in this *The Vanishing* a meditation on the fact that in life there are hedgehogs and foxes. Jeff is a hedgehog; Rita is a fox. And that's why she beats Barney at his own game. Looking at this upon class lines is illuminating too: Jeff is a well-to-do white collar man; Rita is a blue-collar woman, a waitress at a small diner. But goddammit, she's going to stand by her man (sorry, Tammy Wynette) and keep him safe ... even, from his own worst, self-destructive instincts.

What critics complained about in regards to the American *The Vanishing* is the fact that the remake subtracted the "perfect ending" from its equation.

That's not all it subtracts, to put it bluntly.

Also vanished is *Spoorloos'* golden egg dream and the light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel sequence. The reason for these deletions is simple, however: Jeff survives and is reunited with Rita. He does not rejoin Diane in death, and therefore the tunnel shot and the golden egg reference carry no currency. Instead, Sluizer finds a different thematic angle in his remake. This *Vanishing* is more specifically about ego than its predecessor.

Consider, the assertive Rita is so driven by ego that she won't let Jeff go, even though he is obsessed with Diane. She mocks, cajoles, and eventually goes all out to win Jeff back—rescuing him from the brink of death in the process, and battling a serial killer.



Tortured Jeff Harriman (Kiefer Sutherland) is obsessed with the disappearance of his girlfriend in *The Vanishing*.

Similarly, the malevolent Barney is driven wholly by ego. Unlike in the original film, this sociopath does not attempt to contact Jeff until Jeff has already stopped searching for Diane (at Rita's demand, no less). Barney cannot live with the fact that the one person connected with his "act of evil" may let it go and that, consequently, his genius might go unexplained, unacknowledged.

Barney feels he is powerful and worthwhile only so long as he can control and dominate Jeff's mind. "Your obsession is my weapon," he tells Jeff. "I provided the material; you built the cage."

Without that obsession, Barney is just another loser, and that's something his ego cannot tolerate. He must re-engage Jeff to believe in his own self-worth.

Finally, look at Jeff. He too is driven by ego. Barney recognizes this fact, and that's how, in this version, he gets Jeff to drink the drugged coffee. "Who is Jeff Harriman if he's not the guy looking for Diane?" he asks. Jeff has defined himself by his obsession, and without it he has "no job, no money, no love, no peace of mind."

There's a sweep of the inevitable in the Dutch *The Vanishing*. We don't know how it's going to end, but we know that Rex is bound for

trouble. The American *The Vanishing* features more overt violence, a more conventional conclusion (that Roger Ebert complained had too much in common with slasher films), and it forsakes that aura of inevitability for an ending that is, well, determinedly not pre-destined.

But there's absolutely no reason why this new ending is not valid, given Rita's tenacious character/ego in the remake. Here, Jeff gets to "know" the truth (discovering the fate of Diane) and he gets to live. In retrospect, that isn't so horrible an accommodation, is it?

Especially since we already have one version of the film in which this isn't the case.

If we consider the American *The Vanishing* a film about ego, then it is Rita, not Barney (and certainly not Jeff), who comes out on top. She gets everything she wants: namely a devoted man (of a higher station, so-to-speak) and one no longer distracted by the ghost of long-lost Diane. Again, this argument returns us to an important question about the nature of remakes. Are they supposed to be literal translations of previous films? Or are they permitted to play around in the terrain of the originals and draw different conclusions from them? It's entirely possible that no matter what choice he made, Sluizer could not have made a remake that critics approved of. Had he slavishly re-shot, angle for angle, his original film, perhaps the critics would have noted that the remake offered nothing new or original.

In the final analysis, Sluizer has given audiences two distinct, parallel versions of the same terrifying story. The Dutch film is undeniably a work of art, a masterpiece in every sense, about human nature. By contrast, the American version is a solid thriller and probably about as good as the studio system and process of committee filmmaking would permit in the year 1993.

There's a difference in quality, yes, between versions of *The Vanishing*, but perhaps it is not a gulf so wide as many vociferous critics would have you believe.

***Warlock: The Armageddon* ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Julian Sands (Warlock); Chris Young (Kenny Travis); Paula Marshall (Samantha); Steve Kahan (Will Travis); Charles Hallahan (Ted); R.G. Armstrong (Franks); Joanna Pacula (Paula Dare);

Bruce Glover (the Reverend Larson); Craig Hurley (Andy); Rebecca Street (Kate); Dawn Ann Billing (Amanda Sloan); Zach Galligan (Douglas); Richard Zobel (Barker); Jeanne Mori (Receptionist); George Buck Flower (Man in Crowd).

CREW: Trimark Presents a Tapestry and Trimark Production of an Anthony Hickox film. *Casting:* Pagano/Bialy/Manville, Allison Gordon-Kohler. *Based on characters created by:* David Twohy. *Special Effects Make-up:* Bob Keen. *Visual Effects Created by:* BB&J Effects, Inc. *Music:* Mark McKenzie. *Film Editors:* Christopher Cibelli, James D.R. Hickox. *Director of Photography:* Gerry Lively. *Executive Producer:* Andrew Hersh. *Story by:* Kevin Rock. *Produced by:* Peter Abrams, Robert J. Levy. *Written by:* Kevin Rock and Sam Bernard. *Directed by:* Anthony Hickox. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of modern-day Druid "guardians" living in the American West prepare for the impending arrival of the Anti-Christ during the six-day span between a lunar and solar eclipse. Two teenagers, Kenny (Young) and Samantha (Marshall), learn that, by blood-line, they are Druid Warriors fated to do battle with the Anti-Christ. As for the Son of Satan, he is the Warlock (Sands), and he heads West from New York on a mission to collect a set of mystical rune stones that can either save Creation ... or destroy it.

COMMENTARY: Ancient cult secret here: How do you know if your son is really a Druid Warrior?

Answer: You shoot him in the gut with a shotgun, and if he comes back to life, he is! Yippee!

And if he dies? Well ... *nope, he was just a human kid after all. Sorry.*

Obviously, there's a wee problem in logic in that scenario, which the sequel *Warlock: The Armageddon* presents in all solemnity and seriousness.

Here a Druid "wise man" (and I use that term loosely), simply blows away his teenager with a shot gun, and with the confidence that the adolescent possesses the ancient blood line.

Good thing the old man was right too. Just try explaining that one to the police. "I only shot him in the gut, officer because I was sure he had ancient Druid roots!"

Uh-huh.

Warlock: *The Armageddon* is a sequel from director Anthony Hickox that, much like the scenario presented above, is pretty darn stupid. Totally ignoring the events of the first, and vastly superior, *Warlock* (from director David Twohy) this film suggests that the Warlock (Julian Sands again) is actually the Anti-Christ. And that only faithful Druids can stop him from delivering the world unto the Devil.

Where's Camilla when you need her?

I wonder how the world's Christians would feel knowing that only representatives of a pagan religion can kill Lucifer's first-born son. Doesn't really seem to make much sense, does it? Since Christ is a Christian figure, you'd pretty much figure that the Anti-Christ is one too; and that the solution to destroying him rests in that particular faith. Not in runestone-carrying Druids.



The Evil One (Julian Sands) returns in *Warlock: The Armageddon* (1993).

Sure, a knife made from the metal of the Holy Grail (?) can kill the Warlock, but it has to be wielded by a Druid. Or, as the film generically explains, "We're druids ... God gave us certain gifts."

This isn't the film's only strange contradiction. When the Warlock is born, for instance, he doesn't know what an automobile is. He calls it a "carriage," as in "horse-drawn carriage." Never mind that in the previous film the same character encountered cars. Here, he doesn't

remember what they are. But then, after he turns one of his yuppie victims into a twisted work of art, he quips: "Picasso. Definitely Picasso."

So ... the Warlock doesn't know anything about cars, but is well-versed in the oeuvre of Picasso? Where did that information come from? Who's teaching this guy to recognize great works of art, but forgetting to acquaint him with 20th century technology?

Late in the film, the Warlock also asserts that he is older than "the trees" and older than "the rocks" around him. Not to pick nits, but technically that's not true. The movie establishes that he was physically born just five days earlier. The film actually features that scene: a gory birthing sequence that is the sequel's authentic horror highlight.

Otherwise, *Warlock: The Armageddon* dispatches the charismatic Sands and his iconic character on a scavenger hunt for mystical runestones. He gets one from a model ... whom he kills. He goes to a traveling circus and roadshow attractions ... and kills a midget to get another one. And then he goes to a collector to acquire another one ... and kills him too.

These repetitive set-pieces are cross-cut with scenes of teenage Druids Kenny (Young) and Samantha (Marshall) learning to harness their mystical powers. Among the highlights: Kenny ignites a barbecue grill with the power of his mind and learns to converse with chipmunks.

I kid you not.

The movie's nadir is a scene in which a flying CGI baseball, rendered badly, wows an amazed and impressed crowd. Apparently, these people have never seen a spinning baseball in the air before! (Though they aren't even actually looking at the ball; the actors' eyes are all in the wrong places given the position of the mystical but added-later-in-post-production baseball). Julian Sands maintains his dignity in *Warlock: The Armageddon* and still makes for a grand, supernatural villain. It would have been great of the writers and Hickox to give him a story worth his time—a story that had some little continuity with the first film, and one which didn't involve teenage druids learning to communicate with chipmunks and grill hamburgers via psychokinesis.

This one's a little under-done, Kenny. Could you cook it with your brain just a little longer?!

Zombie Bloodbath . (DTV)

Cast and Crew

CAST: Auggie Alvarez (Mike Walsh); Chris Harris (Joey Talbott); Cheryl Metz (Beth Talbott); Frank Dunlay (Ralph Walsh); Jerry Angell (Larry Talbott); Cathy Metz (Gwen Talbott); Jodie Rovick (Melissa); Tonia Monahan (Sherry); Jennifer Geigle (Theresa); T.C. Watkins (Dave Walsh); Julie King (Fox); Jenny Admire(Ivory); Julie King (Stanna); April Davis (Jessica); Veronica Spicer (Gina).

CREW: Extreme Entertainment and A/V Concepts in agreement with Impact Digital Production Presents a Todd Sheets film. *Casting:* Todd Sheets. *Cinematography:* Todd Sheets, Scott Jolley, Andrew Appell. *Music:* T.J. Erhardt, Matthew Jason Walsh, Enochian Key. *Written by:* Todd Sheets, Chuck Cannon. *Executive Producers:* A/V Concepts, Ted Irving, Vinnie Trumillo. *Produced and directed by:* Todd Sheets. *MPAA:* NA. *Running time:* 62 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After an accident at a nuclear power plant, the workers turn into drooling zombies. In nearby Kansas City, veteran Ralph Walsh (Dunlay) and his karate-kicking son, Mike (Alvarez), lead a group of survivors out of their besieged homes and into the underground installation. There, they discover that the installation was built on an Indian burial ground and cursed by the local tribe.

COMMENTARY: Director Todd Sheets has created a shot-on-video horror "movie" (cue the "air quotes") apparently starring your cousin Billy, his Mom, and your favorite nephews, using your uncle's house as a central location.

To term *Zombie Bloodbath* amateurish is to insult amateurs everywhere. This movie is a travesty, unaware of such alien concepts as "editing," "narrative" and "acting." It is video proof that not everyone with a camera, a budget (reportedly \$30,000) and a willing cast (i.e., family members?) is cut out to make films.

The word "bad" can't adequately begin to describe the horror of countenancing *Zombie Bloodbath*. The cast-members, who only charitably could be considered "actors," struggle with their lines, such as they are. The photography is poor, to the point of comic ineptitude.

Case in point: legend has it that Sheets recruited 735 actors to play zombies (for free, no less). Yet in the critical "epic" scenes of zombies traversing fields, staggering in front of railroad tracks, or storming the Kansas City airport, there are no more than fifteen zombies on hand. Incompetently, Sheets shoots them all in a crowded bunch, in long shot. The edges of the frame are empty, and the zombies just scamper through the center of the frame (under a sign for the airport, so we know Sheets was really there).

Consequently, this looks like an outbreak of zombie tourists, not a plague.

If Sheets had really had 735 undead at his disposal, why not deploy them in these big exterior scenes and grant his production a sense of scope? Either the number of 735 is a gross exaggeration for publicity, or Sheets simply doesn't have any clue how to frame a scene.

Zombie Bloodbath's story doesn't make any sense, either. An Indian has placed a "five year curse" (which is pretty specific, don't you think?) on the government's nuclear power plant, and it goes off in Kansas City like a bomb.

Or, at least it does in one suburb and the curse explicitly affects two families. Where the rest of the populace happens to be during this zombie event is anybody's guess.

But one scene of a mother mercifully shooting her pre-adolescent children in the head before offing herself isn't earned in the slightest. What is she committing pre-emptive murder for?

Here come those same fifteen zombies down a dark tunnel.

I confess, murder occurred to me at this point too.

But seriously, did she consider getting up and running instead, before blowing away the wee ones?

Sheets may not hew to concepts such as narrative or story arc, but he sure loves his gore. Boy oh boy. In roughly sixty-two minutes of storyline, the director of *Zombie Bloodbath* stages seven— count 'em!— scenes of zombies feasting on flesh and bloodily ripping out human innards. George Romero considered one such scene sufficient in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), but Sheets decides to go the quantity-over-quality route.

Unfortunately, much of this gory material is also ineptly assembled. The zombies wear whitepancake make-up and black eye-shadow, and during an early scene in the power plant, you can actually see a performer splash grue on his own face to create a

melting effect.

I should mention too that the movie opens with some of the worst editing you could imagine. Inside a board room, panicked nuclear plant officials debate a course of action, and the movie doesn't actually feature hard cuts from shot-to-shot, but soft dissolve-ish overlap cuts, as though distinct transitions were just too difficult to accomplish. Shots just meld into each other, all wishy-washy.

There's not much to hold on to in *Zombie Bloodbath*, but I decided to watch how many times the Mullet Zombie (Larry) re-appeared in each zombie crowd scene after his untimely demise on a bridge. He's in virtually every zombie scene thereafter, regardless of the fact that multiple zombie attacks are occurring in multiple locations simultaneously. His mullet must be magical, and feature teleportation powers.

Another unintentionally funny moment: watch the kid zombie who's last out of the zombie chapel late in the film. The church doors hit him on his way out ... and he's briefly knocked off balance before Sheets cuts to another shot.

That's my message to *Zombie Bloodbath* and Todd Sheets. Don't let the door hit you on the way out.

LEGACY: A sequel, *Zombie Bloodbath 2*, followed this film on video in 1995. But jeez, there's only so much a guy can reasonably be expected to bear.

January 6:

American figure skater Nancy Kerrigan is assaulted and clubbed on the knee at the Detroit Championships. The attack is orchestrated by the ex-husband of her American competitor, Tanya Harding. Afterwards, Kerrigan becomes America's darling at the Winter Olympics. At least until a parade at Disneyland that she calls corny...

January 20:

Shannon Faulkner becomes the first female cadet at the South Carolina military academy, The Citadel. She soon drops out.

Feb. 12-27:

The Winter Olympic Games are held at Lillehammer.

April 5:

Nirvana's lead singer, Kurt Cobain, dies of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. His body is found April 8. A generation mourns.

April 7:

The Rwandan Genocide begins. Hundreds of thousands of Tsutsis are reported dead within weeks. The U.S. does not act to stop the bloodshed.

April 27:

The end of Apartheid in South Africa. Multi-racial elections are held. On May 10, Nelson Mandela becomes the first black president of South Africa.

June 12:

Nicole Brown Simpson and friend Ronald Goldman are murdered in L.A. Brown's husband, O.J. "The Juice" Simpson, is the prime suspect. Simpson flees from the police in his white Bronco on June 17. After being televised live, the chase ends at Brentwood and O.J. Simpson is apprehended.

September 13:

Bill Clinton signs an assault weapons ban, further earning him the enmity of the NRA and the extreme right.

September 22:

The popular sitcom Friends premieres on NBC. It runs until 2004 and stars Jennifer Aniston, David Schwimmer, Matthew Perry, Courtney Cox, Lisa Kudrow and Matt Le Blanc as sex-obsessed Generation X'ers hanging out at a coffee shop.

November 8:

In the mid-term elections, Republicans sweep to control both houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years. Clinton is widely blamed. Newt Gingrich becomes the Speaker of the House. Bob Dole becomes the Majority Leader in the Senate.

December 19:

The Whitewater Scandal begins. It involves Bill and Hilary Clinton's real estate investments in the 1970s and 1980s and the possibility of the duo being involved in an illegal loan in the amount of \$300,000. After two independent counsels, no indictments are ever brought in the matter, and Bill and Hilary Clinton are never found guilty of a single crime related to Whitewater.

***Blink* * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Madelaine Stowe (Emma Brody); Aidan Quinn (Det. John Hallstrom); James Remar (Det. Thomas Ridgely); Peter Friedman (Dr. Ryan Piece); Bruce A Young. (Lt. Mitchell); Paul Dillon (Neal Booker); Matt Ruth (Crowe); Laurie Metcalf (Candace); Michael P. Byrne (Barry); Anthony Cannata (Neda); Greg Noonan (Frank); Heather Schwartz (Young Emma).

CREW: A New Line Cinema Production, a Michael Apted film.
Casting: Linda Lowry. *Costume Designer:* Susan Lyall. *Production Designer:* Dan Bishop. *Music:* Dan Fiedel. *Film Editor:* Rick Sharre. *Director of Photography:* Dante Spinotti. *Executive Producer:* Robert Shaye. *Produced by:* David Blocker. *Directed by:* Michael Apted. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 105 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Emma (Stowe), a woman who has been blind since she was six years old, undergoes a double retinal transplant to achieve normal sight. After her surgery, she experiences a "perceptual delay" in visually recognizing objects and people, a side-effect which causes a problem when she proves to be the only witness to a murder. Detective John Hallstrom (Quinn) investigates the case and falls in love with Emma. He soon learns that a mad serial killer is murdering all the recipients of one organ donor's body parts. Because Emma has new retinas, she's a target too...

COMMENTARY: *Blink* is another run-of-the-mill serial killer police procedural, one featuring a beautiful blind witness (see: *Jennifer 8*), a dedicated but lonely cop, a wrong-headed superior, and, of course, a fiendishly clever serial killer who gives the police a run for his money, even while singing his signature tune, *Three Blind Mice*.

The primary conceit of *Blink* involves sight, particularly the sight of a woman, Emma (Stowe), who has been blind since she was abused by her mother as a child. Now, after an eye transplant, she is experiencing "perceptual delay," meaning that she sees people who aren't there now but who were there before. The police don't view Emma as a dependable witness since she sees these ghosts, and Emma herself is the next prospective victim of the serial killer, who, not entirely unlike the monster in *Body Parts* (1991), is going after people who have received organ donations.

Blink stars Madelaine Stowe and Aidan Quinn as would-be

romantic partners, and the actors share absolutely no chemistry whatsoever. Furthermore, the movie's ham-handed script keeps explaining the plot to the audience, again and again. We get it: someone is killing the recipients of organ transplants.

The perceptual delay aspect of the tale plays like a silly gimmick, and the serial killer, a necro -philiac, is not memorable in the slightest. The film spends almost no time on the killer and his ghoulish predilections, preferring to highlight Emma's abrasive, tough nature and Quinn's desire to romance her.

Even the film's final revelation, that Stowe recognizes the killer by the brand of hand soap he uses, plays as false. Especially, since she's been around the killer in plenty of other scenes throughout the film and never noticed the connection until it could be used by the filmmakers to put her in jeopardy.

Undistinguished mainstream fare, *Blink* exposes the serial killer paradigm at its most formulaic and dull. It's just a bunch of familiar—and therefore dull—ingredients in search of innovation.

Body Snatchers * * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"After the resounding success of Philip Kaufman's 1978 remake, producer Robert Solo sensed franchise potential. He conceived a sequel in which smalltown America finds itself in conflict with the military—a premise that practically begs to illustrate the idea that military personnel are *trained* to be 'pod-like' (emotionless and unquestioning). Starting with that initial idea, several high-profile genre writers—including Larry Cohen and Dennis Paoli—ushered the project through multiple drafts. After years in development hell, the story finally ended up in the hands of director Abel Ferrara and his writing partner Nicholas St. John. Their finished film is a bit muddled—one senses the influence of many conflicting 'visions'—but nevertheless filled with the kind of ambitious ideas that too few modern horror films contain. It is best viewed as the opening chapter of a franchise that never came to be, which is to say that it's filled with intriguing setups and potential that, unfortunately, never paid off."—Joseph

Cast and Crew

CAST: Gabrielle Anwar (Marti Malone); Terry Kinney (Steve Malone); Billy Wirth (Tim Young); Christine Elise (Jenn Platt); R. Lee Ermey (General Platt); G. Elvis Phillips (Pete); Reilly Murphy (Andy Malone); Kathleen Doyle (Mrs. Platt); Forest Whitaker (Dr. Collins); Meg Tilly (Carol Malone).

CREW: Warner Bros. presents a Robert H. Solo Production. *Casting:* Ferne Cassel. *Costume Designer:* Margaret Mohr. *Music:* Joe Delia. *Film Editor:* Anthony Redman. *Director of Photography:* Bojan Bazelli. *Co-Producer:* Michael Jaffe. *Based on the novel by:* Jack Finney. *Screen story by:* Larry Cohen. *Written by:* Stuart Gordon, Dennis Paoli, Nicholas St. John. *Produced by:* Robert H. Solo. *Directed by:* Abel Ferrara. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The family of teenager Marti Malone (Anwar) moves to a military base in the Deep South where her dad, Steve (Kinney), has been assigned by the E.P.A. to investigate improperly stored chemicals. The doctor on base (Whitaker) fears that the toxins are altering the base personnel's perceptions of reality, fostering paranoia, fear of sleep, and suspicion of family members. There is another answer, however. Alien "pods" are duplicating people as part of an invasion of Earth, replacing the genuine articles with inhuman, emotionless things.

COMMENTARY: In 1954, Dell published the science fiction novel entitled *The Body Snatchers* by Jack Finney. Finney's landmark work has since been translated to film a whopping four times—in 1956, 1978, in 1994 and in 2007 (as *The Invasion*).

The terminology associated with *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* franchise, including the descriptor "pod people," has landed in the pop culture firmament of our country and remained there for decades. We have seen variations of the paranoid tale of replacement people in cinematic efforts such as *The Stepford Wives* (1975), and even on TV series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ("Bad Eggs"). There have also been entire TV series titled *The Invaders* (1967-68) and *Invasion* (2005-06) which grapple with some of the same core concepts

as Finney's story: human beings replaced, almost invisibly, by emotionless aliens with a secret agenda.



My stepmother is an alien: Carol (Meg Tilly) is a Pod in *Body Snatchers* (1994).

Besides focusing strongly on the idea of science vs. belief, Finney's novel *The Body Snatchers* treads deeply upon the idea of relationship "alienation." But those alienated from their family units in his book are actually dealing with alien life forms, not run-of-the-mill emotional issues.

It can't be a coincidence that the two main characters in the novel—Becky and Miles—are both divorced. And that's the ultimate form of human alienation: *you live with a person you love for years and years, then wake up one day and suddenly don't feel the same way about that person anymore*. Without warning, something has changed. Overnight, you "don't know" that other person anymore, that husband, that wife, that uncle, aunt, parent or child.

This is alienation of affection and it happens all the time in normal, mundane human relationships. Consider too that the changeover from human to alien comes like a thief in the night, during sleep. Alienation of affection can go on for months or years but

when grappling with it, it too seems to have come all at once. Suddenly, you don't recognize the person in bed beside you anymore. They feel like a stranger. They look like your mate; they have your mate's memories ... but they feel like an interloper, a changeling.

The 1950s version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* has widely been held up as both an anti-Communist story and an anti-Joseph McCarthy tract, while the 1978 version of the material has been read by critics as a commentary on the "Me Generation."

Abel Ferrara's 1990s version, dumped into theaters briefly in 1994 after winning the Palme D'or at the 1993 Cannes Film Festival, gazes more deeply at alienation within the American family unit than any previous version of the material. The film involves a teenager, Marti (Anwar), dealing with several problems.

First, she's an adolescent, meaning that she no longer wishes to obey the seemingly arbitrary rules of her parents and is thus "alienated" from them. There are sparks at the breakfast table one morning over a disagreement between parents and child. "I can't wait till I'm 18," Marti complains. "You think you won't be my daughter then?" her father replies. That's a valid question: will she be his daughter at eighteen, or an alien? The movie has all sorts of wicked fun with normal, everyday lines like that, in context of a secretive alien invasion, where they carry double meaning.

Secondly, Marti lives with an unwelcome stepmother (Tilly), a woman who literally "replaced" her mother, thus a role-snatcher if not a body snatcher. When Tilly's character is replaced by an alien doppelganger during the film, little Andy Malone is afraid of the changeling. "She's not my Mommy," he says. "My Mommy died." He is living a version of Marti's pain ... a feeling that a pretender is now ensconced in the family's midst, and that nobody else seems to have a problem with it.

The other new twist in *Body Snatchers* involves the setting. Most of the movie is set on a U.S. Army military base, a place where emotional conformity and lock-step behavior already exist and flourish. This setting makes it exponentially harder to determine who is human and who is a pod. Soldiers are supposed to follow orders without feelings, without question—just like the aliens.

In the mid-1990s, there was talk of Desert Storm Syndrome and the fact that some veterans returned from Iraq with health issues possibly caused by exposure to toxins released by Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War. *Body Snatchers* subtly picks up on this idea (without naming it), since Marti's Dad goes to the base to determine if faulty chemical storage is making soldiers act ... unnaturally.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of Ferrara's *Body Snatchers* involves the 1990s version of conformity, termed "political correctness." This descriptor was originally coined by the American Left, as a kind of "self-check" on itself against rigid sanctimony in its ranks. The Right, however, quickly co-opted the term "Political Correctness, or "P.C." for short, to discredit left leaning policies.

The term "political correctness" was used widely to complain about affirmative action, the acceptance of homosexuality and even the presence of women in the workplace. President George Bush called it in his commencement address on May 4, 1991, "a movement that would declare certain topics off-limits; certain expressions off-limits." In other words if you didn't use the right terminology or conform to group-think, the so-called "P.C. police would get you."

In practice, the changes to the language wrought by political correctness were actually an attempt to be not just more inclusive and more neutral, but more accurate. The term "Indian" was replaced by "Native American," and geographically-speaking, that's certainly a hard-to-quibble-with improvement. The generic descriptor "policeman" was replaced by "police person" in some instances, and considering the addition of more women in that traditionally-male role (see *Blue Steel*) that also seems more genuinely reflective of the truth.

Nonetheless, the Right's complaints about political correctness resonated with the population at large. Decrying political correctness was "one of the brilliant tools that the American Right developed in the mid-1980s, as part of its demolition of American liberalism."⁴²

Body Snatchers deals with this issue obliquely, but trenchantly. At his daycare, little Andy watches as all his classmates (aliens) are encouraged to draw identical pictures. They express themselves in conformist fashion, and he is punished for showing signs of individuality.

Similarly, humans threatened by the increasingly dominant numbers of the alien majority are encouraged not to "show any emotion," so that they can fit in. So they can't be marked, essentially, as incorrect, by the new dominant culture. The heroes ultimately reject the mores of the majority and in one deliberately politically-incorrect situation, they toss a child (now an alien spy) out of a helicopter to his doom.

Grim in mood, serious, and well-shot, *Body Snatchers* may not be brilliant in the mold of the 1978 Kaufman film, but Ferrara's work is no betrayal of the franchise legacy, either, especially since it is rife with an early nineties subtext for the emotionless Pods. By and large, the film also boasts a melancholy feel, like the battle is already over

and we've lost. The skies always seem orange and autumnal, like night is falling on human individuality. And the final scene, a slow-motion landing at another, almost-identical American Air Force base, seems to indicate that the same events (and same invasion) are bound to repeat as long as conformity reigns. The base is not really a sanctuary, just another place lacking in individuality.

Meg Tilly, as the alien doppelganger for Carol, resonates quite powerfully as the voice of the aliens, a role previously reserved for male performers, including Leonard Nimoy. She is impatient with her "human family" and delivers a memorable, ruthlessly logical rant about the futility of railing against conformity: "Where you gonna go? Where you gonna hide? Where you gonna run? Nowhere. That's where. Because there's no one like you left."

That's a terrifying monologue, and as a whole, *Body Snatchers* encompasses very well the unspoken and mostly irrational fear roiling in the American "silent majority's" psyche in the mid- 1990s. This movie is set in the South, and this fear was felt more in the South too. The old political guard had been defeated by Bill Clinton (who smoked pot and didn't serve in Vietnam), women recruits were attending the Citadel in violation of long-standing tradition, political correctness was changing the established parameters of language, and the Age of the Dominant White man appeared to be over.

So was America going to become a Pod nation, one where free expression was no longer permitted? Or—contrarily—was the country just growing up, and finally putting down racist, sexist, chauvinist, exclusive traditions?

It depends on who you were talking to and what your political leanings might be, but *Body Snatchers* reflects this fear in vivid terms, as well as Finney's long-standing theme about alienation in the family unit.

This *Body Snatchers* is about breaking out of convention, out of group-think, out of the ranks of the faceless, and, as the movie puts it, "standing up" and "fighting back."

***Brainscan* * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Edward Furlong (Michael Brower); Frank Langella (Lt.

Hayden); Amy Hargreaves (Kimberly); Jamie Marsh (Kyle); Victor Ertmanis (Martin); David Hemblen (Dr. Fromberg); T. Ryder Smith (Trickster); Vlasta Vrana (Frank); Dom Fiore (Ken); Claire Riley (News Anchor); Tod Fennel (Young Michael); Donna Bacalla (Mrs. Keller); Dean Hagopian (Mr. Keller).

CREW: Triumph Release Corporation, a Michel Roy Production, a John Flynn Film. *Casting:* Joy Todd, Vera Miller, Nadia Rona. *Make-up Effects Created by:* Steve Johnson. *Music:* George S. Clinton. *Film Editor:* Jay Cassidy. *Production Designer:* Paola Ridolfi. *Director of Photography:* Francois Protat. *Co-Executive Producer:* Jeffrey Sudzin. *Executive Producers:* Esther Freifeld, Erl Berman. *Story by:* Brian Owens. *Written by:* Andrew Kevin Walker. *Produced by:* Michel Roy. *Directed by:* John Flynn. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A lonely horror movie fan, Michael, tries a new mail-order CD-Rom game called Brainscan. It is hosted by a malevolent ghoul called Trickster, who encourages Michael to unleash his dark side in the game. Michael complies, then finds his world falling apart as he learns his murderous actions in the gamesphere have actually occurred in real life!

COMMENTARY: A new generation of video games came of age in the 1990s. This was the decade of *Doom* (1993), the most popular firstperson shooter game in history, and one that utilized startling and (for the time) ultra-realistic 3D graphics and spatial arrangements. By 1995, it was estimated that over ten million Americans had played *Doom* or one of its sequels, including *Doom II: Hell on Earth* (1994).

Other popular video games from the early 1990s included real-time strategy games and survival horror efforts such as *Alone in the Dark* (1992), which eventually gave way to such titles as *Resident Evil* (1996) and *Silent Hill* (1996).

Although no conclusive link between video game violence and real life violence has ever been presented, concerned parents and politicians in the 1990s began to look at video-games in terms of their perceived anti-social qualities. Leading the charge was Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman, a Democrat.

In 1997, he issued a "Video Game Report Card" that looked at video games and video game ratings. He concluded that the ratings system was not doing its job. By 1999, the media was blaming movies (such as *The Matrix* [1999]), video games (such as *Doom*) and music

(performed by Marilyn Manson) for the Columbine High School Massacre.

The 1994 horror movie *Brainscan* uses some of the enduring controversy surrounding video games (and horror movies too, really) as the basis for a tale about a new CD ROM video game called "Brainscan" that allows players to commit brutal homicides, to indulge their "sickest fantasies," in the very lore of the game.

Unusually, the game seems to tap right into the player's brain and so it contextualizes these homicides in terms of the player's real life, thus involving neighbors, family and friends. The gamer is asked to "enjoy the fear" he creates in his victims, and overseen by a malevolent ringmaster called "Trickster."

For much of the film's running time, it appears that the game player, a character named Michael (Furlong), is actually killing real people too. It isn't just a game: the events on the disc are actually happening. Evading the law and responsibility for one's actions thus becomes part of the game strategy too. Michael must cover his tracks, lie, obfuscate, obstruct and try to come out on top.

"If you don't feel the guilt, why accept the punishment?" asks Trickster, and that's an important element of the 1990s Zeitgeist, in which people escaped legal judgment for what many citizens felt were real wrongs. Bill Clinton never resigned the presidency after admitting his inappropriate relationship with Monica Lewinsky. And O.J. Simpson was never found guilty of murdering his wife. In *Brainscan*, Michael similarly hopes to escape justice even though he believes he actually committed the crimes.



Your Fate is at his fingertips. Trickster (T. Ryder Smith) twirls the CD-ROM from Hell in *Brainscan* (1994).

Or, to put it in Trickster's terms: "It's only a crime if you get caught."

At first blush, *Brainscan* may appear a conservative critique of horror movies and horror survival video games. An American teenager gets excited about playing a video game in which he gets to be a murderer.

But on a much deeper level, the film is about a rejection of this belief, about drawing a line that many politicians and clergy refuse to acknowledge. There's a decided difference between watching a work of art (like a horror film) or playing a game in which there are no real life consequences, and actually going out and hurting someone. These are not moral equivalents, and one does not lead to another. Life isn't that simple. Life isn't that obvious.

After Michael plays *Brainscan*, he is horrified to learn that he has been "tricked" into killing people. He thinks it is just a game, but then it seems not to be. He is taunted and cajoled into killing, but ultimately turns away from that path, finally, in Kim's bed room. "Kill her!" Trickster urges. "Cut her up." But once Michael knows the rules

of the game—that Brainscan is not, in fact a game—he stops killing.

The movie's message is very much what Trickster suggests at one point. "Terror is in the doing. It's not watching horror movies, like a child." I would drop off the "like a child" bit (that's just Trickster trying to get under Michael's skin), but the point is valid: that real violence is not a game, is not harmless and is not entertainment.

There's a big difference between a kid who loves *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, *Bride of Frankenstein* and other horror films, and a kid who actually murders people. When a moralistic high school principal in *Brainscan* complains about horror movies that "senseless death is not entertainment," Michael responds trenchantly that horror movies are "an escape." He might also have said that they can often prove cathartic—exorcising the demons of a culture—but in a pinch, escape will do just fine.

The big disappointment in *Brainscan* is that it relies on the "it was all a dream" cliché for a resolution. Yep, it really was all a dream, er ... simulation. Michael did not kill anybody, the Trickster is just a game icon, and all the murderous action and culpability occurred in the gamesphere. Not reality.

This is not only a derivative and perfunctory conclusion to what is often a tense and interesting film, it is highly unrealistic. Audiences are supposed to believe that *Brainscan* is a game that is absolutely undistinguishable from reality, so much so that it can trick the human mind so completely? I know the game is supposed to be "the ultimate in interactive technology" and "feel more real than reality," but still, this is hard to swallow.

Even with 3D advances in games in the 1990s, it's a huge stretch. One has to assume that even if such technology existed, there would be giant matters around liability and lawsuits over this game. It's easy to imagine an over-stressed player experiencing a heart attack when he learns that he has murdered his neighbor across the street, for instance.

Also, as the movie depicts, the game apparently leaves the player with seizures (and drooling). More lawsuits for everyone...

Brainscan is not a judgmental film, but it is a highly moral one. Many parents don't like video games, and *Brainscan* has an answer for that. It reveals that Michael is a latchkey kid left alone for long stretches of time and that his dad is an absentee workaholic. Furthermore, Michael has every new technology available: from video games to computers to video cameras.

In other words, at the same time that he is left alone, Michael is

encouraged to explore all that affluence can buy, to be kept company by video games and horror movies. They are his babysitters. If Dad doesn't like that, it's incumbent on *him* to change it, to either keep the technology from Michael, or spend more time at home with his son talking about the technology, or pursuing other hobbies.

Brainscan suffers from some dodgy CGI special effects and a tidy ending that is way too upbeat (Michael gets the courage to ask Kim out, etc.), but it's still a fascinating look at how our society views horror. And at the line between voyeurism—watching violence—and enacting it. In that meditation, *Brainscan* has power. With a better, more horror-oriented ending it would not be hard at all to imagine the talkative Trickster fronting a series of sequels, just like Freddy.

But the film's ending deprives the character of power and ultimately, longevity in the genre. He's just a game piece, not a boogeyman.

***Cronos* * * * 1/2**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Federico Luppi (Jesus Gris); Ron Perlman (Angel de la Guardia); Claudio Brook (De La Guardia); Margarita Isabel (Mercedes); Tamara Shanath (Aurora); Daniel Gimenez Cacho (Tito); Mario Ivan Martinez (Alchemist); Farnesio de Bernal (Manuelito); Juan Carlos Colombo (Funeral Director); Jorge Martinez de Hoyos (Narrator); Luis Rodriguez (Buyer); Javier Alvarez (Bleeding Man); Gerardo Moscoso (Drunk); Eugenio Lobo (Stoned Man); Adriana Olivera (Tango Student).

CREW: October Films with a Producciones Iguana in association with Ventana Films presents a Guillermo del Toro film. *Art Director:* Brigitte Broch. *Director of Photography:* Guillermo Navarro. *Production Designer:* Tolita Figueroa. *Music:* Javiera Alvarez. *Film Editor:* Raul Davalos. *Produced by:* Bertha Navarro, Arthur H. Gibson. *Special Effects:* Necropia. *Written and directed by:* Guillermo del Toro. *MPAA Rating:* R.

SYNOPSIS: An elderly antique dealer, Jesus Gris (Luppi), acquires the four-hundred-year-old Cronos Device, a gold-plated machine which can restore youth and lengthen the life-span ... but which creates a

feverish appetite for human blood. Meanwhile, a sick old millionaire, De la Guardia (Brook), sends his nephew, the conniving Angel (Perlman), to get the device for himself. Angel kills Gris, but Jesus is not really dead and, allying himself with his young granddaughter, Aurora (Shanath), plots to get the device back.

COMMENTARY: Is the insect God's favorite creature? That's just one of the intriguing questions raised by Guillermo del Toro's haunting story of addiction and family, *Cronos*. The film's protagonist, Jesus Gris (Luppi), is an old man who is acutely aware of time, and perhaps of time running out: he runs a small antique and clock shop in Mexico and cares for his young granddaughter, Aurora (Shanath), because her father, his son, is dead. Jesus fears, perhaps, that he will not live as long as he would like, for her sake.

During the course of *Cronos*, Gris accidentally becomes involved with the four-hundred-year-old life preservation device, the Cronos Device: a small golden box of sorts, with a giant, heaving bug ensconced inside. Del Toro provides several shots of the interior of the device, so that the audience can see the gears and insect within, and understand that the heart of this machine is organic, a parasitic, blood-sucking insect.

In some ways, the contraption seems to mirror the existence of the man who so deeply desires it: De la Guardia. He is so afraid of death that he lives in a hermetically-sealed environment, "sucking" the blood literally from those around him, including the blood, sweat and tears of his trapped nephew, Angel (Ron Perlman), and, if he gets his way, from Gris too. It is unclear why this cold, dying man would want more life, but he is rich, he can afford to be eccentric.

Jesus, who does not desire immortality, uses the *Cronos* device incorrectly and soon begins to grow younger. The audience can detect that his improved looks flatter his vanity. It's nice to feel and look youthful, and at first Jesus thinks the machine is a godsend. Before long, however, it is clear the machine exacts a frightening toll from him: he is addicted to blood and is constantly in need of new supply. Del Toro isn't shy about depicting the lengths an addict will go to get his fix. In one harrowing and grotesque scene, we see Gris licking spilled human blood off the floor in a public bathroom.

The Cronos Device has the same effect as drug addiction, too, in that after a while the good feelings disappear, and the addiction seems to exist just to sustain itself. A miserable Gris comments, "I don't want to be eternal. I just want a way out." No doubt that is how many addicts truly feel.

Cronos features a fascinating opening, in which the creation and

the history of the device is traced to the present, and then the movie becomes even more intriguing with the family story of Gris and Aurora. This grandfather and granddaughter share a bond that is enormously affecting, and you can't help but think the girl is on the right track when she tries to hide the Cronos Device from her beloved grandpa. Again, it's not hard to infer the meaning here: addictions have no preferences and preserve no relationships. They take everything away, and before long, Gris is a pasty-faced vampire. He is no longer in a position to enjoy his golden years, or his relationship with his wife and granddaughter.

The film ends with Gris barely alive, his skin like porcelain, as he keeps repeating his name "Jesus Gris." The addiction has taken everything but his name, and that's all he has to hold onto now, as he faces an uncertain, but certainly diminished future. His wife and Aurora are at his bedside, but the ending is not happy in any way, shape or form. Aurora is not ready to let the old man go, and it's not clear he will go, at least not entirely, thanks to the bizarre journey he's been through.

Cronos is heartfelt and strangely beautiful. It's told in the style of "magic realism," meaning that the story, overall, boasts a realistic atmosphere save for one element, the Cronos Device. The real world, in other words, is invaded by an aspect of the supernatural or supernormal. The approach is efficacious and reveals how the everyday life of a good, humble family is impacted by that which is not sought ... but which possesses vast power. Jesus is an innocent and he largely remains one.

He tries the Cronos Device just once. But unfortunately, like drugs, it gets its hooks in him. It only takes once, and before long, he's coming back for more.

***Dario Argento's Trauma* * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christopher Rydell (David Parson); Asia Argento (Aura Petrescu); James Russo (Captain Travis); Laura Johnson (Grace Harrington); Hope Alexander-Willis (Linda Quirk); Sharon Barr (Hilda Volkman); Frederic Forrest (Dr. Judd); Piper Laurie (Adriana Petrescu); Ira Belgrade (Arnie); Brad Dourif (Dr. Lloyd); Isabell Monk (Georgia Jackson); Cory Garvin (Gabriel Pickering); Terry Perkins

(Mrs. Pickering); Peter Marc (Mark); Gregory Beech (Deaf Man).

CREW: Overseas Film Group presents an ADC Production, a Dario Argento Film. *Casting:* Louis Di Giamo, Ira Belgrade. *Director of Photography:* Raffaele Mertes. *Production Designer:* Billy Jett. *Special Make-up:* Tom Savini. *Film Editor:* Bennett Goldberg. *Music:* Pino Donaggio. *Written by:* Dario Argento and T.E.D. Klein. *Based on the original story by:* Franco Ferrini, Gianni Romoli, Dario Argento. *Executive producer:* Andrea Tinnirello. *Produced and directed by:* Dario Argento. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 106 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young anorexic, Aura (Argento), survives the apparent brutal decapitation of both her parents by a vicious serial killer called "The Head Hunter." The vulnerable Aura is befriended by an artist named Christopher (Rydell) at a local TV news station. Christopher and Aura together attempt to discover the identity of the head hunter as the murderer claims more victims ... and more severed heads.

COMMENTARY: A serial killer armed with a deadly weapon—a custom-made head remover or garrote—pursues transgressors in Dario Argento's extremely gory early-1990s giallo called *Trauma*.

Argento's first feature-length American production showcases the director's familiar facility with affecting visuals at the same time it reflects his seeming inability to dramatize a story in coherent fashion.

Often with Argento, however, you can overlook the narrative deficiencies because of the startling visuals, and *Trauma* is just such a case. It has an off-kilter, compelling way of looking at its world and offers an interesting lead character in Aura, a girl with anorexia nervosa. Because Argento's eldest daughter, Anna, suffered from the disease and died a year or so after the movie was made, though not of anorexia, a sense of the personal artist haunts the film.

Anorexia nervosa affects mostly girls and involves a distorted self-image. Women who are not fat believe they are fat and fear gaining weight ... so they stop eating. Or they purge (vomit) after meals to keep their weight low. Anorexia has a high-mortality rate, and some older psychoanalytic models looked at it in terms of being something of a sexual disorder—the symptom of a little girl who wants to remain small forever, or who wants to stave off maturity (and in particular, sexual maturity).

In the film, Aura reminds others that almost all anorexics eventually die of the disease, and she dreams of her father, leaning in

to kiss her—an image, perhaps, suggesting her desire to remain a child—Daddy's little girl.

After the movie proper ends, Argento's camera pans up to a house for an extended view of a lovely, but woefully underweight young woman dancing alone. She moves with a sense of grace and with an utter lack of self-consciousness on a balcony. This is Anna, Argento's anorexic daughter; she is quite beautiful, and if film grammar is any clue, isolated.

That Argento ends his film on this note suggests, perhaps, that he is recording his daughter at the height of her beauty and life, for posterity's sake; because he knows that soon, she will be gone, taken from him. That's extremely sad, and there is an undercurrent of pathos in the film, especially if you know anything about Argento's biography.

Otherwise, *Trauma* is very much of the serial killer/slasher-style paradigm, replete with gory killings and a crime or transgression in the past (by doctors and nurses) that spurs the acts of bloody vengeance in the present. *Trauma* also utilizes the supernatural, particularly a disturbing séance, as a smoke-screen or red herring. Like many serial killer films of the 1990s (*Jennifer 8*, *Se7en*), rain always falls in *Trauma* when the killer strikes, but therein lies the tale.

Both Asia and Dario Argento returned to the serial killer format for their next film, *The Stendahl Syndrome* (1999), and it too centered on a psychological disorder, one involving great works of art and a kind of disassociation over them. *Trauma* may be the better of the two films simply because Asia Argento seems to embody more fully the spirit of a rebellious, perhaps dying sixteen year old. She doesn't do so well with the role of a hardened cop in *Stendahl*.

Brad Dourif also shows up for a cameo in *Dario Argento's Trauma*, and his last scene in the film involves one of the most ridiculous and unconvincing severed head shots of the entire decade.

Interview with the Vampire * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"... this adaptation of Anne Rice's famous vampire novel, directed by Neil Jordan, has intense claustrophobic power. And the scenes of bloodletting, as Cruise and comrade-in-damnation Pitt drain

their female victims to alabaster perfection, have a stunning, painterly beauty. There is also a homoerotic subcurrent, since Cruise's chief pleasure is evidently in witnessing Pitt's. As he showed in 1992's *TheCrying Game* and his other films, director Jordan knows a thing or two—possibly more—about how to film forbidden impulses with a ravishing flourish."—Tom Gliatto, *People Magazine*, Volume 42, Issue 21, November 21, 1994, page 21

"... unappealing, unrelenting, and (after awhile) downright boring."—Leonard Maltin. *Leonard Maltin's 2009 Movie Guide*, Penguin Group, 2009, page 679

"... a lavishly mounted fever dream embellished with lurid cinematic set-pieces, certainly one of the most visually elegant vampire movies ever produced and a necessary corrective to the garish excesses of *Bram Stoker's Dracula*."—David Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*, Faber & Faber, 2001, page 395

"A deeply-flawed but somewhat intriguing adaptation of Anne Rice's world famous novel. The problem here is that both Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt (especially Pitt) are woefully miscast as vampires Lestat and Louis. A very young Kirsten Dunst steals the show as child bloodsucker Claudia. Plus, Elliot Goldenthal's score is suitably haunting."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Tom Cruise (Lestat); Brad Pitt (Louis); Antonio Banderas (Armand); Stephen Rea (Santiago); Christian Slater (Malloy); Kirsten Dunst (Claudia); Thandie Newton (Yvette); Nicole Dubois (Creole Woman); Mike Seelig (Pimp); Nathalie Bloch (Maid); Bellina Logan (Tavern Girl); Sara Stockbridge (Estelle); Domiziana Giordano (Madeleine).

CREW: Geffen Pictures Presents a Neil Jordan film. *Casting:* Julie Taylor, Susie Figgis. *Vampire Make-up and Effects:* Stan Winston. *Music:* Elliot Goldenthal. *Film Editors:* Mick Audsley, Joke Van Wijk. *Production Design:* Dante Ferretti. *Director of Photography:* Philippe Rousselot. *Co-Producer:* Redmond Morris. *Screenplay by:* Anne Rice, based on her novel. *Produced by:* David Geffen, Stephen Woolley.

Directed by: Neil Jordan. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 123 minutes.

INCANTATION: "Cruise is ludicrously miscast. They've taken a blond, feline, androgynous, sixfoot-tall vampire hero, and they've cast a short, dark, all-American kid." ⁴³ —Author Anne Rice responds to the casting of Lestat

SYNOPSIS: A two-hundred-year-old vampire from New Orleans, Louis (Pitt), tells a reporter (Slater) the story of his unnatural life beginning with his "birth" at the fangs of a hedonistic and sadistic vampire called Lestat (Cruise). Once changed by his new mentor, Louis resisted feeding on human beings, dining instead on poodles, rats and other small animals. Eventually, Louis and Lestat left Louisiana and the States for Europe, and even "adopted" a child vampire named Claudia (Dunst). Over the years, Louis and Claudia came to fear and despise the capricious Lestat, and planned his demise.

COMMENTARY: With the publication of her novel *Interview with the Vampire* in 1976, author Anne Rice began to shift the public's perception of that famous old movie monster, the bloodsucking vampire.

Before Rice's literary work, which eventually sold some eight million copies, the vampire was generally portrayed in novels and on film as a notably unsympathetic villain, a creature of the night that—while perhaps alluring for a time—had to be destroyed.

Although there were certainly some variations in this formula and at least one sympathetic vampire had already come to the fore of the pop culture, *Dark Shadows'* Barnabas Collins (Jonathan Frid), Rice's efforts moved the vampire in the direction of being a "tragic hero," or perhaps more aptly, a Byronic one.

A Byronic hero—a category named after Lord Byron (1788–1824)—is an arrogant, cynical, world-weary sort, but also cunning, bright, charismatic and without pretension. Much like a so-called "tragic hero," a Byronic hero is one who often has lived a troubled life, or suffered from bad decision-making in the past.

The wholesale Byron-izing of vampires in the pop culture resulted in the presentation of more emotional, sad "monsters" than before in film history, ones who had grown weary of immortality, and ones who resisted the dark urge to drink human blood.

On television, "noble" vampires such as Nick Knight on *Forever Knight* (1993–1996) and David Boreanaz's *Angel* (1999–2002) are examples of latter-day, Byronic/tragic vampires. They brood. They glower. Though shadows in the human world, they protect its

existence.

And certainly, the popular *Twilight* saga of the 21st century, with its sullen, down-in-the-mouth teen vampire Edward Cullen, is also an undeniable outgrowth of Rice's disco decade reimagination of the vampire myth.

Long-time horror and movie monster aficionados, by and large, tend not to approve of the Byronic vampire approach, accurately perceiving it as a shift away from the terror and unearthly, even alien qualities that made Stoker's Count Dracula so popular and enduring a character. The Byronic approach of Rice or Myers creates a vampire protagonist with understandable and very human motives. But longtime genre fans who grew up with Lugosi, Lee or Quarry remember vampires as the most sinister, powerful, and enigmatic of foes. Perhaps what is being described here is a generation gap of sorts.



Louis (Brad Pitt, left) and Lestat (Tom Cruise) are vampires who share an undefined partnership in *An Interview with a Vampire* (1994).

Regardless, director Neil Jordan shepherded Anne Rice's Byronic vampire approach to the screen in the winter of 1994 on a budget of sixty million dollars. The production of *Interview with the Vampire* was exposed to a great deal of scrutiny, especially when Rice herself complained in public about the casting of Tom Cruise in the role of the evil Lestat. She wanted Julian Sands (Warlock) to assay the role, but then, when pleased with Cruise's interpretation, had to seriously back-peddle her criticism in a full-page ad in *Daily Variety*.

However, it is difficult to deny that Rice was right the first time. Sadly, the acting in *Interview with a Vampire* is overtly melodramatic. Cruise and Pitt both adopt this brand of wispy, theatrical, faux British accent and in both cases it becomes laughable after a time, especially given the overall solemn tone of the enterprise. I'm certainly not the first to suggest this, but if Cruise and Pitt had switched roles, the movie might have worked far more effectively. Pitt could have offered his typically anarchic, glib, mad approach to villainy (see *Twelve Monkeys* [1995]), transforming Lestat into an 18th century Tyler Durden. For his part, Cruise could have imbued Louis with the sort of burgeoning but reluctant heroism we've come to associate with him in pictures such as *War of the Worlds* (2005).

But the job of a film critic is to review the film made not the one he might rather see. And, though handsomely mounted, *Interview with the Vampire* is only a sporadically compelling picture. More than that, it's one that seems to skirt its true subject matter.

At the heart of Rice's story is a vampirism-as-homosexuality metaphor. This is a solid and intriguing notion, since homosexuality and vampirism share—between movies and real life—a derided status in mainstream Western culture. Rice has been described, accordingly, as a "gay icon" and homosexuality has been noted as a "key element" of her work.⁴⁴

Author Harry M. Benshoff, writing *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and Horror Film* describes the Rice book in these terms:

In one of the most sustained metaphoric reworkings of the predatory homosexual/vampire myth, an exchange of bodily fluids is all that is required to transform a human being into a predatory vampire him/herself. *Interview with the Vampire* has

even been called a parody of a gay "coming out" story, in which the first-person narrator Louis learns to come to terms with his new-found lifestyle, at first hating himself, then eventually finding solace and companionship with others of his kind.⁴⁵

Keeping this concept in mind, Jordan's *Interview with the Vampire* opens with two men meeting on a dark street and then going off somewhere together ... and with that surreptitious rendezvous, the audience enters the "alternative" world of vampire desires and travails.

This is a movie, as the dialogue suggests, about "a hunger" that the characters have never before "felt" but which nonetheless compels them. Again, it isn't hard to read that hunger as a sexual one; not a thirst for blood.

Accordingly, when Lestat first drinks blood from Louis he lifts him in the air in what amounts to a distinctive male-on-male embrace, and again, it's impossible (especially given rumors about Tom Cruise's orientation) not to read the act of intertwining as sexual in nature, as passionate.

When coupled with woefully solemn dialogue like "he drained me to the point of death," and intercut with shots of Cruise moaning in what could be pain or what might be pleasure as Pitt drinks from his outstretched appendage (his arm), *Interview with the Vampire* powerfully suggests a world of homosexual passion.

After Claudia, played by Kirsten Dunst, enters the picture, the perception of Lestat and Louis as sexual and romantic partners is reinforced. These vampire men are a childless couple essentially adopting the young girl. One man instructs her in the way of the world with cruelty; the other shows her kindness and gentleness. But any way you slice it, it's clearly *My Two Vampire Dads*.

But as it goes on, the movie tries to shade and obfuscate this reality. It "mutes, if not entirely eliminates the homosexual overtones" of the vampire liaisons in the picture.⁴⁶

Therefore, the central problem with *Interview with the Vampire* is its abject cowardice in examining and developing the real motives of Lestat. He has, in both deed and action, made Louis his eternal "partner," with all the sexual connotations that go along with that act. Director Neil Jordan's films have often featured interesting observations about sexuality, so you would expect him to develop this aspect of the narrative. *The Company of Wolves* (1987), concerning a girl's sexual awakening and fear of intercourse (and of "wolves"), is one example of his exploration of this theme. *The Crying Game* (1992),

with its gender-bending central relationship, is another.

But *Interview with the Vampire* doesn't boast the courage to plumb the Lestat-Louis relationship for what it plainly is: a love affair between two men. It never truly examines Lestat's reasons for choosing Louis or excavates the reasons why Louis and Lestat continually re-encounter one another over the years and centuries. If not sexual partners, why are they drawn to each other? If Lestat is not attracted to Louis, than why make him an eternal partner (now *there's* a commitment). If you subtract romantic, sexual attraction from the equation, *Interview with the Vampire* as a film simply doesn't make much basic narrative sense.

By failing to acknowledge the true nature of the film's primary relationship, *Interview with the Vampire* sacrifices any possibility of genuine character development. Lestat is just a monster who happens into Louis's life and won't leave—like an unwanted houseguest. And Louis is just a guy who keeps meeting the same vampire across the years and being alternatively drawn and repulsed by him.

When they last meet in the film, their parting is utterly devoid of pathos because their relationship has not been acknowledged for what the visuals suggest it is: a romance. Only Claudia—an adult "woman" in a child's body—is developed adequately, and consequently she is the most memorable and intriguing character in the film.

It doesn't help *Interview with a Vampire*, either, that the narrative side-alley featuring Armand and his vampire underworld and theatre comes across as horribly pretentious. Or that Tom Cruise goes way over the top dancing and singing with a corpse in one notable scene. The film's finale is a problem too: after apparently being dead for a time, Lestat is actually still alive, claiming another male victim (the reporter). So the audience is literally back to square one as the movie ends.

From a distance, *Interview with a Vampire* certainly looks and sounds like the *Gone with the Wind* of vampire movies but on closer inspection the visuals aren't matched by a well-told story. On top of that, the movie is not scary, a flaw shared by many Byronic vampire stories.

Ultimately, I agree with David Denby's assessment from *New York Magazine*: "Is *Interview with the Vampire* so irresolute—so muffled, so baffling—because Jordan can't quite say what he means? ... If he wants to make a gay movie, he should just go ahead and make one."⁴⁷

*Leprechaun 2 * 1/2*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Warwick Davis (Leprechaun); Charlie Heath (Cody Engels); Shevonne Durkin (Bridget); Adam Biesk (Ian); Arturo Gil (Drunk at Pub); Sandy Baron (Morty); James Lancaster (William O'Day); Clint Howard (Tourist); Andrew Craig (Midwestern Dad); Martha Hackett (Detective); Kimmy Robertson (Tourist's Wife); Tony Cox (African American Leprechaun).

CREW: Trimark Pictures Presents a Donald P. Borchers Production, a film by Rodman Flender. *Casting:* Linda Francis. *Leprechaun Make-up:* Gabe Z. Bartalos. *Production Designer:* Anthony Tremblay. *Director of Photography:* Jane Castle. *Film Editors:* Richard Gentner, Christophe Roth. *Music:* Jonathan Elias. *Based on characters created by:* Mark Jones. *Executive Producer:* Mark Amin. *Written by:* Turi Meyer and Al Septien. *Produced by:* Donald P. Borchers. *Directed by:* Rodman Flender. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Once upon a time in Ireland, a tricky Leprechaun (Davis) cursed his slave, William O'Day (Lancaster), and swore to marry O'Day's female descendant a thousand years hence. In the city of Los Angeles in 1994, the Leprechaun attempts to make good on that promise, pursuing and abducting Bridget (Durkin), O'Day's progeny. Bridget's boyfriend, Cody (Heath), and his conartist legal guardian, Morty (Baron), attempt to rescue Bridget from the Leprechaun before the wedding night.

COMMENTARY: If you absolutely, positively feel the burning desire to watch at least one *Leprechaun* franchise film before you die, your best choice is likely 1994's *Leprechaun 2*. This verdict should not be interpreted, necessarily, as an endorsement. This Rodman Flenders effort is certainly not a great horror film.

However, *Leprechaun 2* is tolerable in a lowrent sort of way and marginally less tiresome than its immediate predecessor. The first film highlighted the misadventures of a wise-cracking preadolescent, a fat simpleton, and a whiny Jennifer Aniston, and it squandered the majority of its seemingly-eternal running time on endless chases back-and-forth through a dusty front yard in "North Dakota" (really Southern California) while Warwick Davis interminably shouted, "I want me gold!"

But what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. And by contrast, this *Leprechaun* sequel dispenses with the irritations of its predecessor and moves at a fast clip. Although calling some aspects of the film "funny" might be an exaggeration, there are elements of *Leprechaun 2* that are ... *amusing*.

For instance, a jerky on-the-make guy named Ian is on the receiving end of a nasty hallucination. The Leprechaun makes him imagine that he is about to kiss Bridget's (er, a stunt double's) ample breasts, when in fact he is cozing up unknowingly to a whirling industrial fan. As the lecherous boy moves in for a suckle he literally cuts off his nose to spite his face. This isn't a deep moment or a scary one, simply a reassertion of the genre's old canard about "cosmic justice" meted for the immoral.

Okay, it's not Shakespeare, but that single violent set-piece is more fun and more imaginatively rendered than anything to come out of Mark Jones' original *Leprechaun*. Furthermore, writers Turi Meher and Al Septien have been clever enough not to re-hash the Leprechaun-insearch-of-pot-of-gold plot that wore out its welcome so quickly in the first film.

Instead, this film focuses on the Leprechaun's search to acquire a bride ... a partner. After the Leprechaun captures Bridget and introduces her to his "bridal chamber" (inside a tree imported from Ireland, now on the premises of Harry Houdini's estate in the Hollywood Hills), the film becomes mildly engrossing, if not entirely diverting. At least the endangered Bridget and her boyfriend Cody are intimately connected with this narrative, as opposed to the characters trapped in the original *Leprechaun*—folks who just happened upon the imp and his pot of gold but had no significant connection with him.

Davis accomplishes much in the role of the taunting, Freddy-esque villain too, showing off the Leprechaun's disgustingly amorous side this time around. His bon mots in *Leprechaun 2* focus on his sexual desire for Bridget and the marital bed ("it's bedtime for Bridget!") and that fact—while wrong in a million ways—is sufficiently creepy to give the film a sense of immediacy for at least a while. The scene in which the Leprechaun traps Bridget on his bed, touches her abdomen and discusses the fact she will soon be creating a "Leprechaun litter" is actually pretty bracing. That indeed seems a fate worse than death.

Another scene is devilish good fun too. Morty traps the Leprechaun in a wrought-iron security safe and forces the malevolent trickster to grant him three wishes. How the Leprechaun torments Morty and forces the shape of his second and third wishes is a prime

example of the "be careful what you wish for" warning later made the bread-and-butter of the *Wishmaster* series.

Finally, any movie that finds the opportunity to land Davis's Leprechaun in a kitted-up, green go-kart of death can't be entirely bad. Just mostly bad.

***Lurking Fear* * 1/2 (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jon Finch (Bennett); Blake Bailey (John Martense); Ashley Laurence (Cathryn Farrell); Jeffrey Combs (Doc Haggis); Allison Mackie (Mrs. Marlowe); Paul Mantee (Father Poole); Joe Leavengood (Pierce); Vincent Schiavelli (Skelton Knaggs); Michael Todd (Creature); Cristina Stoica (Maria); Luana Stoica (Beth); Adrian Pintea (Ryan); Ilinca Goia (Leigh).

CREW: Full Moon Entertainment Presents *Lurking Fear*. *Casting:* Robert McDonald, Perry Bullington. *Production Designer:* Milo. *Art Directors:* Valentin Calinescus, Dan Toader. *Costume Designers:* Viorica Petrovici, Mihaela David. *Special Make-up Effects:* Alchemy FX, Michael S. Deak. *Film Editor:* Charlie Simmons. *Music:* Jim Manzie. *Director of Photography:* Adolfo Bartoli. *Executive Producer:* Charles Band. *Adapted from a story by:* H.P. Lovecraft. *Produced by:* Vlad and Oana Paunescu. *Written and directed by:* C. Courtney Joyner.

SYNOPSIS: Ex-convict John Martense (Bailey) discovers from a shady associate, Knaggs (Schiavelli), that his father buried a great deal of money with a corpse at a church graveyard in rural Lefferts Corners. When he goes to retrieve the money, however, John runs into a group of people, including the town doctor (Combs), dedicated to blowing up the cemetery because strange subterranean monsters dwell beneath it. Pursued by criminals who also want the money (and who murdered Knaggs), Martense casts his lot with the monster fighters. Meanwhile, Father Poole (Mantee) attempts to make a deal with the leader of the subterranean ghouls for the survival of his "flock," but has his heart ripped out instead. In the pitched final battle between man and ghoul, Cathryn (Laurence) and John discover an underground family of the monsters, and set out to destroy the inhuman things with the help of a gasoline truck.

COMMENTARY: Filmed in Romania like *Subspecies* (1991), this Full Moon direct-to-video effort is based on the 1922 short story "The Lurking Fear," though it takes several notable liberties with the source material.

Both stories involve the Martense family history and its gruesome legacy, a degeneration to white-eyed, scraggly-hair beasts. But Lovecraft stories, including "The Lurking Fear," are always heavy on a suffocating atmosphere of dread and the short (76-minute) movie satisfies itself with gunplay, action and big explosions instead.

For example, sexy, sleeveless Ashley Lauren (*Hellraiser's* Ashley Laurence) gets into a physical brawl with a female criminal in one action scene. And the movie ends with pyrotechnics: the fiery destruction of the crypts in Lefferts Corners, where the monsters reside.

There are some good moments here and there, and in a few of them, one can almost sense what *Lurking Fear* might have been: *Night of the Living Dead* meets *The Fog*, set in a rural church and cemetery. Unfortunately, *Lurking Fear* never truly builds any momentum, or does much of value with its possibilities (a critique of Christianity seems encoded here but remains only touched upon).

Also, the entire, tiresome gangster sub-plot of *The Lurking Fear* seems unnecessary, and wasn't present in the original short story. H.P. Lovecraft is notoriously hard to adapt to film, but *Lurking Fear*, which feels contained to just a set or two, doesn't even give it a good try. That's a shame because with horror icons Laurence and Jeffrey Combs and Vincent Schiavelli in the mix, this movie had the potential to be something great.

***Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* * * ***

Critical Reception

"Branagh directs with the same frenetic energy he brought to *Henry V*, *Dead Again* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. But here the style seems clumsy and erratic, a mix of all three. The scenes of giddy frolicking between the mad scientist and his love, Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter), are right out of *Much Ado*. And as *Frankenstein*, Branagh is Henry V on steroids; he spends

far too much time raging around with his shirt off, flaunting his gym-hardened torso. Before long, the megalomania of the character and that of the director become indistinguishable. De Niro, meanwhile, gives an intriguing performance—what we see of him. But, as his character acquires speech, it is hard to take him seriously: the Creature sounds like Robert De Niro doing an impression of Marlon Brando in *The Godfather* through the world's most hideous Halloween mask."—Brian D. Johnson, *Maclean's*, "Tales from the Crypt," November 14, 1994, Volume 107, Issue 46, page 112

"For anyone who's actually read the original novel, this is an impressive film in that it manages to create excitement through what is essentially a slow-moving story, which is quite an achievement. Robert De Niro was seriously miscast as the monster, there's no denying, but director Kenneth Branagh delivered an exciting and for the most part faithful adaptation. The most significant plot deviation from the novel, the resurrection of Elizabeth, offered a missing piece of the Frankenstein puzzle that makes one wonder why no one's done this before (although early story concepts of 'The Bride of Frankenstein' involved something along the same lines)— if you're capable of creating life, why not save your wife? Patrick Doyle's music added much to the film and Branagh created one of the most visually invigorating creation sequences of any Frankenstein film. It's not perfect but it's not the turkey many would call it. Sadly, most of us haven't read the novel, and if you haven't, this film probably seems like a grossly over the top pile of pomp, which is sad. The novel is difficult for modern audiences to read (it's not scary and it's not very plotdriven, particularly when compared to Bram Stoker's novel, *Dracula*— which is a real potboiler in the classic sense). It's too bad, really. This is a great adaptation of the original novel. It's just probably not what most people want from a Frankenstein film."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"One of the most influential pieces of literature came from the most unlikely of sources, a young woman in the 19th century challenged to write a scary story at Lake Geneva in Switzerland. From humble beginnings, and little critical recog

niton for many years, came *Frankenstein*, which would go on to become the source of numerous tellings on stage and screen, and eventually a cultural icon. Over the course of its cinematic incarnations, a handful of versions stand out, from the classic Universal Picture, to the Hammer Films version, as well as *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. In this version director and leading actor

Kenneth Branagh brings the viewer closer to the original literary source, and through this Robert De Niro as the creature has the ability to reason and speak. These features come together to present a less monstrous and 'other,' more human creature. This provides a narrative context for the exploration of some of the issues present in Shelley's original story, including medical and scientific ethics related to the creation of life, the relationship between creator and creation, and fractured parent-child relationships. *Mary Shelly's Frankenstein* represents an interesting and often overlooked exploration of the *Frankenstein* mythos."—John W. Morehead, *TheoFantastique*

"Anyone hoping for a companion piece to Coppola's *Dracula* is in for a major disappointment with this overblown mess from ham extraordinaire Kenneth Branagh. The usually excellent DeNiro is a joke as the monster, and Branagh turns in a painfully overblown performance as the good doctor. Unfortunately, we have yet to see a truly faithful, truly quality adaptation of Shelley's novel."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kenneth Branagh (Victor); Robert De Niro (The Creature); Helena Bonham Carter (Elizabeth); Aidan Quinn (Captain Walton); Tom Dulce (Henry Clerval); Ian Holm (Baron Frankenstein); John Cleese (Professor Waldman); Robert Hardy (Professor Krempe); Richard Briers (Grandfather); Cherie Lunghi (Caroline Frankenstein); Celia Imrie (Mrs. Murtz); Tervyn McDowell (Justice); Gerard Horan (Claude); Joanna Roth (Marie); Sasha Hanau (Maggie); Alfred Bell (Landlord); Richard Clifford (Minister); George Asprey (Policeman); Ryan Smith (William); Siobhan Redmond (Midwife).

CREW: Tristar Pictures presents a Francis Ford Coppola Production, a Kenneth Branagh film. *CASTING:* Priscilla John. *MUSIC:* Patrick Doyle. *COSTUME DESIGNER:* James Acheson. *PRODUCTION DESIGNER:* Tim Harvey. *DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:* Roger Pratt. *FILM EDITOR:* Andrew Marcus. *EXECUTIVE PRODUCER:* Fred Fuchs. *BASED ON:* *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley. *WRITTEN BY:* Steph Lady, Frank Darabont. *PRODUCED BY:* Francis Ford Coppola, James V. Hart, John Veitch. *DIRECTED BY:* Kenneth Branagh. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 123 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Trapped in ice near the North Pole, a ship captained by ambitious Robert Walton (Quinn) picks up a wanderer, a desperate man from Geneva, Dr. Victor Frankenstein (Branagh). Frankenstein

recounts a strange story for his host, a story involving the doctor's lifelong quest to destroy the scourge of death. In particular, after his formal schooling Frankenstein undertook a dark quest, to create life itself in the form of a misshapen, assembled-from-corpse-parts creature (De Niro). After abandoning the creature, his metaphorical son, Frankenstein learned it was not so easy to put down the past. The creature set about destroying everything that Frankenstein ever loved, including his little brother, William (Smith), and his beloved bride, Elizabeth (Carter). Even now, Frankenstein continues his pursuit of the monster in the cold dark of an undiscovered country...

COMMENTARY: To put the matter bluntly, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* is no more Mary Shelley's than *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) was Bram Stoker's.

In film, the director is the prime creative force (seconded by the film editor), and the written word simply isn't as important. Lest we forget, film is first and foremost a visual medium. So, any claim by the filmmakers here of complete and total fidelity to Mary Shelley is not only wrong, it's actually an impossibility, especially considering the differences between film and literature. The relevant question to ask, instead, is this: Is *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* as faithful an interpretation of the novel as one can rightly expect, given this situation?



Dr. Victor Frankenstein (Kenneth Branagh) vows to conquer death itself in *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994).

The answer is that the Branagh movie certainly makes a good faith attempt. This is the only screen adaptation of *Frankenstein*, for instance, to feature Shelley's wraparound story: the tale of Victor Frankenstein encountering Captain Walton on an ocean of ice near the top of the world. This sequence is vitally important to an understanding of Shelley's work. It is in these passages that the long-wandering, long-solitary Victor gains some sense of perspective about what he has done, what he has wrought. It is in this scene that the overarching narrative gets contextualized and readers are presented with the very point of the novel.

Specifically, in Shelley's text, Victor explicitly advises Walton to "seek happiness in tranquility and avoid ambition." In other words, Walton—who may be on the verge of a great discovery as an explorer—should not risk the lives of his crew solely to "distinguish" himself in the annals of "science" and "discoveries." He should not be blinded by ego, as Victor was surely blinded by his.

There's a heavy didactic element of the tale here: Victor is able to see what he has done and warn both another individual, Walton, and indeed the reader of the book, not to make the same mistake he has. The monster in Shelley's book is a consequence of, and metaphor for, outof-control ego. When Frankenstein dies, he will finally be able to acknowledge something beyond ego. "Soon I shall die, and that which I now feel will no longer be felt," he sees. Frankenstein no longer feels he must conquer death, and furthermore, senses that, beyond death, there is a kind of connectedness to the ones he has lost.

It is easy to enumerate the reasons why this critically-important scene has always been removed from *Frankenstein* movies: it is prohibitively expensive in terms of setting, additional characters, and so forth. And, as book-end scenes, it exists outside the events of the central tale. Yet to cut out this scene robs Victor of his valedictory moment, his moment of recognition of his mistakes.

Branagh's *Frankenstein* benefits enormously from the icy prologue and epilogue. It opens the film with a burst of action (a ship becomes stranded on the ice after a ferocious storm) and with Shelley's vision of mystery, of the end of the world itself. This is a place, in 19th century terms, where knowledge ends and the vast unknown stretches as far as the eye can see. This setting, this undiscovered country, remains the perfect expression for Victor's journey: cold and dreadful. Who knows what terrors lay in these mountains of ice? Here there be dragons ... *and monsters*. The foreboding ice sheets of the North start the book and the movie off with a scintillating sense of terrors unexplored, but looming. Somewhere out there is the monster...

In the novel, Victor's mother does not die in childbirth, as is the case in the Branagh film, but this is a relatively minor change. It is probably necessary in the film to start Frankenstein off young in his obsession: the vanquishing of death itself from the human equation. Here, he learns the terrors and permanency of death as a relative youth.

A more troubling change involves the disposition of the Frankenstein family servant, Justine. In the novel by Shelley, Victor must watch as she stands trial for a crime she did not commit (the murder of his brother, William). And all throughout the trial, Victor keeps his mouth tightly shut. He has exculpatory evidence in his possession but does not use it to free Justine, for fear of being discovered or unmasked as the creator of an abomination. In the novel, this is cowardice pure and simple, and it makes Victor much less heroic in nature.

In Branagh's film, Justine is violently hanged by a mob in a pulse-pounding action scene just as Victor is on the way to see her, and therefore Frankenstein doesn't have to understand and dwell—over the considerable length of a trial—on his own culpability in her sentencing and brutal demise.

Unlike the change involving Victor's mother, an alteration which accented Frankenstein's nature and drive, this change substantially *goes against* the core of Shelley's story. It lets Victor off the hook for his actions. He was racing to save Justine when she was killed!

The most substantial alteration in this filmed version of *Frankenstein* arrives at the climax. In the book, the monster kills Elizabeth, but Victor does not re-animate her. In the movie, harking back to *Frankenstein Unbound* (1990), that's precisely what the obsessed scientist does. In some ways, this modification makes a lot of sense, and Elizabeth's rebirth is brilliantly shot and edited. If a man had the knowledge to create life, would he not, in his moment of utmost grief, use that knowledge to save the one he loves most?

Victor has not yet learned his lesson of ambition, and the re-animation of Elizabeth as a scarred abomination is the very thing that would seem to make him—at long last—"see" what he has done. It's the punctuation of Victor's Persian Flaw, and works very well in the film, even if it is not an element of the original book.

Mary Shelley's tale does not go into any significant detail about how Victor brings life to the dead. It remains deliberately vague about the secret he has discovered. It is natural that such a gap be filled in the film since, again, it is necessary to visually depict the process. This isn't a case of being unfaithful to the literary work so much as it is

imagining something where Shelley left matters deliberately vague.

The re-birthing scene in Branagh's *Frankenstein* is strange, over-the-top, and not entirely effective. It involves a shirtless Branagh running madly about through a Rube Goldberg laboratory that looks like the life-sized equivalent of the old Parker Brothers' game Mouse Trap. The lab is filled with impossibly heavy equipment and the process depends on split second, but also impossible timing.

The process involves tubes, vats, acupuncture, electricity and amniotic fluid, and it plays like the weirdest fitness routine you've ever seen. The scene reeks of ego, as the muscular Branagh tugs at equipment and stretches and hops from one odd piece of equipment to another. This is an example where a little restraint—something far simpler, like an operating table and a bolt of electricity—would have gotten the point across. The bells and whistles and pecs are just distancing and distracting.

On the other hand, the re-birthing scene, while seemingly impossible and out-of-scale to one man's capacity to construct in the 1800s, may—with its overt phallic imagery—showcase one of the film's and story's primary points: Frankenstein playing God, usurping the role of creator from the Divine, and even from the female of the species. In *Beyond Hammer: British Horror Cinema Since 1970*, author James Rose writes:

The mise-en-scene of Victor's laboratory is not so much a "workshop of filthy creation" ... but more a combination of sexual symbols: the womb in which the Creature is placed is a large copper coffin lined with amniotic fluids. Suspended above this are large testicular bags, each writhing with electric eels, surrogates for sperm. From these bags protrudes a blatant phallic symbol, a large hollow tube.... The whole scene is, as Branagh says, "full of sexual imagery" ... that positions Victor not necessarily as the creature but the symbolic unification of Mother and Father.⁴⁸

If interpreted in this light, all of Branagh's shirtless huffing-and-puffing could be construed, perhaps, as the rigorous motion of conception.

Finally, there's the movie's depiction of the monster in the film, which is extremely faithful to Shelley's text. The monster appears hideous, consisting of sewed-together corpse pieces, develops the power of speech, and even becomes a reader.

Yet, here's a case in which being too faithful to the text isn't necessarily good, especially in terms of visuals. De Niro is not a tall fellow by any stretch and his monster lacks a certain sense of stature, grace and menace, which is something you can't say of Karloff's monster. Here, he is a scarred, dead thing brought to miserable life—in concept perfect—but there's just nothing romantic or visually appealing about this monster. And, in some sense, that's what the audience longs for. Some visual connection to the monster, some sense of it as more than just parts stitched together, although that is literally what it is.

But a talking, ugly, short-in-stature Robert De Niro in make-up just doesn't fit the bill in terms of what today's audiences seek of their monsters. Perhaps the famous block-forehead, neck bolts interpretation of the 1930s and 1940s is clichéd, but even *Frankenstein Unbound*, with its long-maned, glowing-eyed, devil-faced monster is more memorable than the distinctly human-seeming monster of Branagh's *Frankenstein*.

By 1994, we had all seen scarred, deformed people very much like this monster and were still able to deal with them as "human beings." But in this movie, we're supposed to take a man of similar appearance and "shudder" at him as a monster. It just doesn't work in today's environment.

Kenneth Branagh himself is the movie's greatest asset and greatest weakness. On the former front, many aspects of the film are quite gorgeous, particularly images of the monster's isolation on his journey—crossing a swamp for instance. The scene in the ice cave, frozen and foreboding, is also perfectly vetted, the set-up for all that comes after. And Branagh's acrobatic camera-work late in the film, at the height of the terror, proves a nice reflection of an early scene in which Victor and Elizabeth dance together and the camera spins around them dizzily. It's like the film itself has spiraled out of control.

On the other hand, it's a little unclear why the director felt the need to cast himself in the lead role when he is much too old to play a college-age Frankenstein. He's terrific—world weary and exhausted—in the scenes set on the ship that book-end the film, but patently unbelievable in the scenes between.

Also, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* is hyperenergetic to the point of being over the top. It's a relatively unnuanced tapestry of big smiles, big tears and big emotions. A grittier, more realistic approach and a grimmer atmosphere would have worked better. A scene involving Frankenstein and his monster slipping repeatedly in amniotic fluid, and another of a monkey hand going crazy suggest *The Evil Dead*, and

that's the wrong note to hit in the story of Frankenstein.

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein gets so much of the author's work right, which is why it merits three stars, but it gets so much about the horror genre wrong. The movie is never particularly scary, and the monster itself, despite the best and faithful efforts of De Niro, is forgettable and lacking any kind of larger-than-life presence.

Ultimately, all the kinetic camera-work can't hide the production's lack of imagination about the monster, who is often seen in broad daylight instead of shadows, and who, finally, seems more pitiable than terrifying. Lost is the novel's idea that the monster is entirely untrustworthy, that if Victor creates a companion for it, it will want something else (a metaphor, perhaps, for a child's dependence on his parents).

There's some strange connection between Branagh's ego and Frankenstein's ego here, and it would be tempting to note that vanity in both instances—the filmmaker's and the good doctor's—created a "monster." But that's probably not fair. At the very least, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, not entirely unlike *Pet Sematary*, hints at one of the most important ideas in horror: the utter unacceptability of death and the Promethean, human drive to conquer it.

Probably the most faithful presentation of Mary Shelley's story ever put to film, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* is also a version of the story that most horror enthusiasts really dislike. One reason for this is that Boris Karloff and James Whale, by making a great film in 1932, largely supplanted the original imagery of Mary Shelley in the mind of film fans.

Going back to Shelley's work was commendable, but Branagh's effort does not do enough to replace the powerful imagery and performance of Karloff. Even a great actor like De Niro can't work miracles without a great visual concept supporting his work. In the 1990s, Frankenstein needed to be bigger, more horrible, more evil, more frightening than anything audiences had ever seen if the intention, as stated by the opening card was to "curdle the blood" and "quicken the beatings of the heart."

On the other hand, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* is decidedly more faithful to its source material than the much more popular and crowdpleasing *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Here, the characters are essentially the same as their literary counterparts. There, Dracula was turned from repugnant, monstrous abomination to romantic hero with a lovelorn heart.

Mother's Boys * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jamie Lee Curtis (Judith); Peter Gallagher (Robert); Joanne Whalley-Kilmer (Callie); Luke Edwards (Kes); Joss Ackland (Lansing); Peter Gilfoyle (Mark Kaplan); J.E. Freeman (Everett); Colin Ward (Michael); Joey Zimmerman (Ben); Vanessa Redgrave (Lydia); John C. McGinley (Mr. Fogel); Lorraine Toussaint (Robert's Associate); Ken Lerner (Analyst).

CREW: Dimension Films and Miramax Films Presents in association with CBS Productions a Patricia Herskovic, Jack E. Freeman Production, a Film by Yves Simoneau. *Casting:* Francine Maisler. *Costume Designers:* Deena Appel, Simon Tuke. *Music:* George S. Clinton. *Film Editor:* Michael Ornstein. *Art Director:* David Bomba. *Director of Photography:* Elliot Davis. *Executive Producers:* Bob and Harvey Weinstein, Randall Poster. *Based on the novel by:* Bernard Taylor. *Produced by:* Jack E. Freeman, Wayne S. Williams, Patricia Herskovic. *Written by:* Barry Schneider, Richard Hawley. *Directed by:* Yves Simoneau. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Three years ago, a confused, depressed woman, Judith (Curtis), left behind her husband, Robert (Gallagher), and her three sons, Kes (Edwards), Ben (Zimmerman) and Michael (Ward). Now, she returns home, wanting to reclaim her family even though he is dating sweet elementary school assistant principal, Callie (Whalley-Kilmer). After Robert makes it clear that reconciliation is impossible, the vengeful, sociopathic Judith resorts to subterfuge, vandalism, the corruption of the innocent and attempted murder. Pre-adolescent Kes is caught in the middle, devastated at his mother's absence and also fearing her presence.

COMMENTARY: A biological mother who abandoned her family and now wants it back is the interloper and villain in the creepy *Mother's Boys*, starring Jamie Lee Curtis in a rare femme fatale role.

While Dad (Peter Gallagher) and his girlfriend Callie (Whalley-Kilmer) attempt to do the hard job of parenting three pre-adolescent boys, Curtis's character, Judith, blows back into town and begins showering the boys with expensive gifts, like Nintendo Game Boys.

Judith dramatically plays up her role as biological mother ("they finally had to cut me open to get you out," she tells her oldest son, Kes, to re-earn his trust), and transgresses, while the "good" parents have to sit back and patiently simmer because "the law's on her side. She's the mother," as a none-too-helpful lawyer puts it.

So this is another 1990s movie that centers horror in the American family, and in particular, the blended, new family of the era. In a situation like this, should an absent biological mother still be granted privileges over a responsible and engaged father? Well, Dad doesn't do himself any favors by threatening Judith's life, since, Linda Tripp-style, she just happens to be tape-recording the conversation.

And, as the movie points out early on, mothers abandon their young even in nature. One scene set in a science classroom shows a mother frog doing just that. The relevant question is, does the mother frog ever come back to reclaim what she sees is her biological privilege?

These interloper films always feature at least one incident of utterly outrageous, transgressive behavior. In *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, an interloping nanny breast-feeds another woman's child. In *The Crush*, teenage Adrian uses a castoff condom and recovers the semen from her prey to make it look like she was raped. But *Mother's Boys* really takes the cake.

A nude Judith sits in the bath-tub of her apartment and orders her boy, Kes, to "sit down" and "talk" to her in this inappropriate state. It's a long walk to that pedestal bath-tub, and utterly unsettling (and inappropriate) that a Mom should use sex to manipulate her son. After she describes how the doctors had to cut Kes out of her, Judith stands up—again, totally naked—and shows the boy the scar. Yuck.

Also like many horrors of the 1990s, *Mother's Boys* concerns the cycle of abuse and pain that travels from generation to generation in a family. Judith is not quite right, her mother (Vanessa Redgrave) informs the audience, because her father committed suicide and abandoned her. Judith went into a depression, staring off into space.

Following Judith's death, the film ends with young Kes in the same boat: staring at the camera. He has become the equivalent of that sad little girl, and according to the film's mythology, will ultimately come to repeat Judith's selfish, transgressive behavior.

Mother's Boys also compares the family unit to the solar system in a scene set at a planetarium. People in a family are like planetary bodies, with gravity having an impact on everybody. Sometimes the impact of such gravity is positive. But sometimes a rogue body—like Judith—swings into orbit and causes chaos and destruction.

Unlike many interloper films, Judith remains very human. She never becomes an all-powerful Bogeyman, and her grand plan to kill Callie goes dangerously awry. This is a refreshing break from formula, wherein all interlopers automatically seem to have invincible powers.

Instead of killing Callie, the plan backfires and Judith very nearly kills two of the children she is trying so hard to get back. The camera spins dizzily over the crash site, on the edge of a mountain (it's always the edge of a mountain; see *The Good Son* [1993]), a visual representation of Judith's hysteria as she realizes what she's done. In trying to rescue the boys from her own trap, Judith falls to her death. And ironically, that's exactly the way her father died: in a fall.

These interloper movies can really get the blood boiling, as the usurper often seems to have all the cards on his or her side, from the law itself, to, in this case, a biological drive and imperative. *Mother's Boys* is no exception; it really gets the audience rooting for Callie, the school principal and girlfriend, who is a much stronger role model for the kids, and, of course, not a raving lunatic.

As usual in these movies, the dad is the weak link. Gallagher's Robert is briefly seduced by Judith, and he wastes precious time waffling over old wedding photos. He opens himself up to the possibility of a reunion with Judith, and that's just the crack in the door she kicks open.

Curtis is known for playing Final Girls/ Women in horror films from *Halloween* (1978) to *Blue Steel* (1990), and in *Mother's Boys* she is a revelation as a cloying, creeping, over-sharing monster mother figure. But importantly, she doesn't make Judith a cartoon, and at the end of the film you are glad she's gone, but somehow unhappy that she had to die. She's a tragic figure, one whose destiny has been pre-programmed by her childhood.

"See, milk spills!" Judith declares at one point in *Mother's Boys*, and that's another metaphor the film uses.

Mother's milk should be pure and copious, but here, mother's milk is spilled poison.

***Natural Born Killers* * * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Woody Harrelson (Mickey Knox); Juliette Lewis (Mallory

Knox); Robert Downey, Jr. (Wayne Gale); Tommy Lee Jones (Warden); Tom Sizemore (Detective Jack Scagnetti); Joe Grifasi (Deputy Sheriff Duncan Homolka); Marshall Bell (Deputy #1); Rodney Dangerfield (Mallory's Dad); Everett Quinton (Deputy Warden Wurlitzer); Jared Harris (London Boy); Pruitt Taylor Vince (Deputy Warden Kavanaugh); Edie McClurg); Mallory's Mom); Russell Means (Old Indian); Lanny Flaherty (Earl); O-Lan Jones (Mabel); Richard Lineback (Sonny); Kirk Baltz (Roger); Maria Pitillo (Deborah); Sean Stone (Kevin); Dale Dye (Dale Wrigley); Evan Handler (David); Louis Lombardi (Deputy Sparky).

CREW: Warner Brothers in association with Regency Enterprises and Alcor Films, presents an Oliver Stone Film. *Casting:* Risa Bramon Garcia, Billy Hopkins, Heidi Levitt. *Costume Designer:* Richard Hornung. *Film Editors:* Hank Corwin, Brian Berdan. *Production Designer:* Victor Kempster. *Director of Photography:* Robert Richardson. *Executive Producer:* Arnon Milchan, Thom Mount. *Story by:* Quentin Tarantino. *Written by:* David Veloz, Richard Rutowski, Oliver Stone. *Produced by:* Jane Hamsher, Don Murphy, Clayton Town -send. *Directed by:* Oliver Stone. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 121 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Spree killers Mickey (Harrelson) and Mallory (Lewis) become a media sensation, even as authorities attempt to apprehend them. Also on their trail is *American Maniacs* host, Wayne Gale (Downey Jr.). After the duo is apprehended and incarcerated for their crimes, Gale plans to interview them live on Super bowl Sunday. The interview turns into a prison riot and an escape attempt, however.

COMMENTARY: Following two surreal hours of ultra-violent imagery and deep social criticism, Oliver Stone's controversial 1990s masterpiece *Natural Born Killers* concludes with fact.

Specifically, the film ends with real-life footage of the Waco/ David Koresh stand-off, disgraced ice skater Tonya Harding taking a tumble, Lorena Bobbitt on the witness stand (on trial for cutting off her husband's penis), the murderous Menendez Brothers, murder suspect O.J. Simpson, and even Rodney King asking (famously): "Can't we all just get along?"

This montage is an exclamation point, a sharp punctuation capping off the film's fiercely presented argument. It seems to say, "Welcome to the tabloid-TV culture of America in the 1990s, where crime pays and pays well."

Commit a notorious murder and you are ... a superstar.

Accordingly, *Natural Born Killers* was advertised on theatrical release as a "bold new film that takes a look at a country seduced by fame, obsessed by crime, and consumed by the media."

And yes, that indeed represents truth in advertising. *Natural Born Killers*— a sensational bombardment of incendiary sound and imagery—burns through its expansive running time with a blazing indictment of the mainstream media. The charge: lowering the national discourse. Finally, director Stone makes his explicit closing argument with the aforementioned reallife archival footage. Case closed.



Serial killers in love: Mickey (Woody Harrelson) and Mallory (Juliette Lewis) in Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994).

Natural Born Killers' closing montage declares, essentially: You think we're exaggerating? You think we're kidding? Well, lookie here: this is who we are (to appropriate *Millennium's* confrontational [1996–1999] tag-line). The documentary-style final montage pointedly connects the misadventures of fictional mass-murderers Mickey (Woody Harrelson) and Mallory (Juliette Lewis) to the real-life celebrities who found fame and fortune the same way. It tells us that even though *Natural Born Killers* qualifies as satire, it is hardly exaggerated in terms of narrative content, though style and presentation are different arguments entirely.

This closing documentary montage also represents Oliver Stone's

inoculation from critics who complained that he was coarsening the dialogue himself. On the contrary, *Natural Born Killers* represents cinematic commentary at its finest because it draws together so many disparate cultural elements and synthesizes them into a lucid, pointed critique of the times.

After making its case in fictional and artistic terms, it graduates to the terrain of the real and we see there is little gap between what Stone has imagined and was happening every day on our televisions.

Early in *Natural Born Killers*, the film re-constructs, in flashback, the first, fateful meeting of Mickey and Mallory. This sequence is presented as a black-and-white TV sitcom from the 1950s—something along the lines of *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1962), or, of course, *I Love Lucy* (1951–1957).

This "sitcom" of Mallory's family life in *Natural Born Killers* charts the colossal gulf between the imagery sold to America regarding family life and the truth, for many Americans, of such family life in the 1990s.

Specifically, a greasy, monstrous Rodney Dangerfield portrays Mallory's dad in this sequence and, well, he is hardly Robert Young in *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960). On the contrary, he is verbally and physically abusive to his wife (Edie McClurg) and his children. He gropes his own daughter and even sexually abuses her. Again, this is a far cry from the perfect domestic bliss of *The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet* (1952–1956).

When one of the first national surveys regarding childhood sexual abuse was conducted in 1989, researchers discovered that such abuse was prevalent in a whopping 27 percent of respondents.

To parse that figure: on the cusp of the 1990s more than one-in-four American women reported being sexually abused by family members during their formative years. That's not just a shameful statistic, it's an epidemic. But the media wasn't going to connect the dots for us. It was too busy feeding us reinforcing images about the American family (in empty-headed sitcoms), and, at the opposite pole, entertaining us with the bread and circuses of talk shows.

Natural Born Killers threads together these two disparate worlds. One commercial image was patently idealized and false (dangerously so), and the other encouraged our worst rubber-necking instincts. Was it any wonder our culture had become so schizophrenic? Self-righteously moral on one hand and voyeuristic on the other?

In *Natural Born Killers*, the form of the sitcom or "situation comedy" reveals Mallory's life as she imagined it should be (replete

with an oppressive laugh-track eradicating any scary sense of ambiguity). But the content of that domestic drama reveals the grim truth of it. "She has a sad sickness," Mickey notes of Mallory at one point. She "wanders in a world of ghosts." Those ghosts are black-and-white ones transmitted by a flickering cathode ray tube—images of perfect sitcom personalities who don't exist in real life. Mallory is haunted by the media's image of family life, unaware that it can never be.

In *Natural Born Killers*, Robert Downey, Jr., plays Wayne Gale, the arrogant host of a lurid "true crime" TV series called *American Maniacs*. Gale is not, however, concerned with truth or objectivity, merely with high ratings ... which will bring him wealth and personal fame. Gale is so smug that he looks upon his subjects as "apes" and notes he is the "God" of his own world.

Mickey and Mallory's cross-country killing spree is thus an opportunity for Wayne to grandstand, to look powerful in front of his audience. He schedules a live interview with the incarcerated Mickey for Super bowl Sunday. And there, the vainglorious Wayne shall show off to the high heavens. He will look heroic by verbally jousting with the "monster," Mickey.

When a riot begins in Mickey's prison, however, Wayne blurs the lines. He goes from reporting on the crimes to participating in them. He picks up a gun and actually starts shooting police officers to keep the broadcast going, to keep the story alive (even as mortals die). The message is clear here, isn't it? The media is complicit in the crime sprees it reports with such verve.

Occasionally in *Natural Born Killers*, Oliver Stone jump cuts—in almost subliminal fashion—to expressionistic visuals depicting Wayne Gale as the Devil. Actually, as a blood-soaked Devil. Since this character symbolizes the media in the film, Stone is making a comparison of "evils," and finding the mainstream media amongst the worst. *Natural Born Killers* reveals clearly how criminals and the media work hand-in-hand. The media transforms criminals into celebrities, and the criminals in turn, hand the media high ratings. It's a win-win arrangement in what Stone calls a "fast food culture."

In keeping with this theme, there's a great montage midway through the film that features "people on the street" in London, Tokyo, Paris and America professing their undying love of killers Mickey and Mallory. The spree-murderers also make the covers of *People*, *Esquire*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Post* and other periodicals. That which is famous must be good, right? Stone even cuts to Brian De Palma's *Scarface* at one point, and, as viewers, we are asked to ponder an

important question. Why do we, as Americans, worship our gangsters? Why do we admire killers?

Like Remy Belvaux's brilliant satire, *Man Bites Dog* (1992), Stone's *Natural Born Killers* suggests that, in the unending quest for a greater audience share, the media can't help but participate and encourage the violent stories it reports on and profits from. The irony is that Mickey and Mallory understand this "evil" and put an end to Wayne Gale: they kill him on camera, effectively killing the media's role in their particular story. To some people, this makes these bad guys—on some weird level—admirable.

Many right wing critics complained vociferously about *Natural Born Killers*. It indeed seems to present unrepentant murderers as the "heroes" of the piece. My response to this argument is two-pronged. First, *Natural Born Killers* is a surreal, avant-garde expression of Mickey and Mallory's story, and to them, they certainly are the heroes of their adventure. And secondly, Stone boasts no illusions about his protagonists. In fact, he continually associates the two killers with the symbol of the rattlesnake.

A rattlesnake is not, in a strict sense, evil. A rattlesnake is, however, a dangerous killer. And, in the lingo of the film (and Mickey himself), Mickey and Mallory are "natural" born killers, meaning that they were made this way ... like the rattlesnake. I take this to mean they were socialized to become society's rattlesnakes. They are not evil, per se, they are merely living according to their nature. And even though they are murderous, at least they love each other.

This is not a glorification of violence or brutality, it's a notation, I submit, about honesty. Mickey and Mallory are honest about themselves. They are the only people in the film who can make this particular claim. They are exactly what they appear to be: natural born killers. Mallory's dad is not a loving force of paternal wisdom as the sitcom form suggests he should be ... he's an exploitative sexual abuser. Wayne Gale is not a tribune of the people and honest broker of the facts, he's a sideshow barker and rubber-necker seeking personal fame and glory. Even Tommy Lee Jones' warden and Tom Sizemore's police detective, Scagnetti, are not symbols of legitimate law enforcement, but rather sick sadists looking to get their piece of the pie.

In a world of such personalities, Mickey and Mallory are indeed a lesser evil because they know what they are and don't pretend to be something else. At the very least, they aren't "buying and selling" an artificial image.

It's no coincidence that Mallory is depicted, at one point in the

film, reading Sylvia Plath's 1963 novel, *The Bell Jar*. That story was set in a complacent, slick modern society of tremendous hypocrisy. The main character, Esther, was a tabloid writer aware of the lurid details of the jetset. In real life, Plath chose suicide rather than continued existence in such a culture. In *Natural Born Killers*, Mickey and Mallory choose homicide as a solution, but in both cases, the act seems a protest against a garish, excessive world built on tabloid pillars.

Oliver Stone's film stops far short of endorsing Mickey and Mallory as role models or model citizens, however. During one powerful scene, a window in a hotel becomes a TV screen of sorts. Behind Mickey and Mallory we see images of Stalin and Hitler prominently displayed. Worship these people at your own risk, the movie seems to say. It's a slippery slope indeed from Mickey and Mallory to O.J. Simpson to the Menendez brothers to Hitler or Stalin. Why? The celebrity culture thrives on ratings, not on inherent worth or morality. We should not mistake fame or infamy for virtue, and that's a key message of Stone's movie.

It's a well-known fact that Columbine killers Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris used the term "NBK" (Natural Born Killers) as code for their own horrific killing spree. But these young killers certainly took away the wrong lesson from Stone's film. They imagined being famous, whereas fame is something that Mickey and Mallory never covet or desire in the film. Stone's film criticized such fame, and specifically, we have that ending montage to confirm that *Natural Born Killers* is intended, indeed, as social criticism.

Mickey and Mallory are rattlesnakes in *Natural Born Killers*, and they almost die while crossing a field of authentic rattlesnakes. That image, perhaps, is the film's most resonant one. It's not just a regurgitation of the old live-by-the-sword/ die-by-the-sword truism, but a comment on the very nature of our culture and corporate media. Navigating a straight, safe trajectory isn't always easy.

Natural born killers? Mickey and Mallory are practically babes in the woods compared to the cynicism of Wayne Gale, Jack Scagnetti and the other vultures they encounter in this film.

Night of the Demons 2 * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christi Harris (Bibi); Darin Heames (ZBoy); Bobby Jacoby (Perry); Merle Kennedy (Mouse/ Melissa); Amelia Kinkade (Angela); Rod McCay (Father Bob); Johnny Moran (Johnny); Buck Peters (Rick); Jennifer Rhodes (Sister Gloria); Christine Taylor (Theresa); Zoe Trilling (Shirley); Ladd York (Kurt); Mark Neely (Albert); Rachel Longaker (Linda); Jim Quinn (Demon Voice).

CREW: Republic Pictures Home Video and Blue Riders Pictures Present a film by Brian Trenchard Smith. *Casting:* Tedra Gabrial. *Prosthetic Make-up:* Steve Johnson. *Line Producer:* Bill Berry. *Film Editor:* Daniel Duncan. *Director of Photography:* David Lewis. *Music:* Jim Manzie. *Executive Producer:* Henry Seggerman. *Produced by:* Walter Josten, Jeff Geoffray. *Screenplay by:* Joe Augustyn. *Based on a story by:* Joe Augustyn, James Penzi. *Directed by:* Brian Trenchard-Smith. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: As a Halloween dance approaches, a local Catholic high school student body becomes obsessed with the local landmark Hull House, reputedly haunted by Satan's favorite: the demonic Angela (Kinkade). Shirley (Trilling), a troublesome teen, throws a party in Hull House and even gets the terrified girl nicknamed "Mouse" (Kennedy) to attend. Before long, Angela is up to her murderous tricks and it's up to a gung-ho nun, Sister Gloria (Rhodes), to save the day.

COMMENTARY: *Night of the Demons 2* is yet another modest, mildly-amusing horror sequel with a simple plot: a group of horny teens throw a party at haunted Hull House, only to be tormented and killed by the demonic Angela.

For good measure, *Night of the Demons 2* throws in some girl-on-girl action, a bit of voyeurism (the demonic Angela watches two teens have sex) and other lascivious acts. All this visual decoration is necessary, presumably, because the plot is so hackneyed and the characters are off-the-shelf representatives of the by-nowvery-tired slasher paradigm (bitch, shy girl, final girl, etc.).

Night of the Demons 2 descends quickly into enjoyable high camp during its third act, when a nun named Sister Gloria, well-played by Jennifer Rhodes, readies herself for combat with the forces of Hell. She inflates holy water balloons, wields her belt like a lasso, and makes quips during combat. "Spare the rod and spoil the child," "Say your prayers," etc. The nun suit-up scene is a hoot too: a funny collection of insert shots and close-ups that cleverly mocks the *Rambo* aesthetic.

Although it's tempting to rail at another lowbrow movie that plays the entire genre for easy laughs, *Night of the Demons 2*, especially as it reaches its climax, is actually amusing. Too often, movies like this just sort of peter out, sliding into unrelenting boredom or tedious violence. But the inclusion of spritely Sister Gloria as a major player really gives this movie a strong second wind, and even a degree of charm.

Nightwatch (Nattevagten) * * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Nikolaj Coster Waldau (Martin); Sofie Grabol (Kalinka); Kim Bodnia (Jens); Lotte Anderson (Lotte); Ulf Pilgaard (Inspector Wormer); Rik Louise Andersson (Joyce); Gyrd Lofquist (Old Nightwatchman); Niels Anders Thorn (Doctor); Stig Hoffmeyer (Rolf); Leif Adolfsson (Theater Instructor); Henrik Filg (Actor); Ulrik Thomsen (Pub Thug #1); Christian Friis (Pub Thug #2).

CREW: Miramax Presents a Thura Film Production, a film by Ole Bornedal. *Director of Photography:* Dan Lauster. *Executive Producer:* Michael Dela. *Music:* Joachim Holbeck. *Produced by:* Michael Obei. *Set Designer:* Sorena Kia Sorenson. *Film Editor:* Camila Skosen. *Written and directed by:* Ole Bornedal. *MPAA Rating:* NA. *Running time:* 107 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: As a serial killer and necrophiliac continues to murder prostitutes after making them "play dead," a young law student, Martin (Waldau), gets a job as the new night watchman at a creepy old morgue, a place of death and secrets. Meanwhile, Martin's soon-to-be-married friend, Jens (Bodnia), suggests that the two students forget "the limits" for a while and play a game. They will challenge each other, "all in the name of freedom." But when Martin and Jens become involved with a prostitute named Joyce (Andersson), they find themselves drawn into the serial killer's trajectory and into the investigation being conducted by Inspector Wormer (Pilgaard).

COMMENTARY: *Nightwatch* (original title in Denmark is *Nattevagten*) is a precise, finelywrought thriller and a welcome variation on the

serial killer paradigm. The police procedural aspects are mercifully played down, and the action centers instead on two reckless law students who, facing an imminent end to youthful freedom, decide to challenge each other with a series of escalating dares and challenges. These dares draw the duo into a web of terror, and the film, from director Ole Bornedal, finally makes a point about what is really "a challenge," playing childish games or accepting the responsibilities of adulthood.

Nightwatch features one of the creepiest and most unsettling opening acts in any 1990s serial killer effort. It involves young Martin assuming his responsibilities at the morgue as night watchman. He is escorted over the premises (at night), by the old night watchman, and promptly his head is filled with stories and mysteries by his elderly mentor. The old man points to mysterious tubs in one room, allegedly filled with body parts. "You can smell the formalin," he says. "Don't even go in there."

During this extended tour of the morgue facility, Bornedal limits the amount of cutting to an absolute minimum so that the audience experiences the full duration of the long, lonely walk to the room where the corpses are stored.

Creepily, Martin must walk past rows of corpses to insert a key in a lock, and the movie plays on audience fears of being in the dark with a room filled with the dead.

Other mysteries abound. The old guard warns Martin that if he works at the facility for any length of time, he will develop "bad breath." The reason behind this is uncertain, but Martin indeed develops bad breath, as if the place is infecting his very body and soul.

It's uncanny how effectively *Nightwatch* creates chills. There's no suggestion that the serial killer is lurking anywhere on the premises, and yet the extended tour of this house of the dead is extremely unsettling. At one point, Martin creeps himself out when he unexpectedly views his reflection in a mirror, and there's something universal about this set-up. We've all been alone in a foreboding place, our isolation creating ghosts and phantoms out of nothing. With expert direction from Bornedal, *Nightwatch* gets right at the heart of that amorphous, undirected sense of fear—of nightfall itself and of long, dark hallways.

Nightwatch also boasts a strong narrative through-line and arc of development in terms of its characters, a quality that Bornedal's American remake lacks by comparison. Specifically, Jens is a fully-developed character here, and his impending marriage is very much on his mind. "I hate studying law," he says. "I hate having 'fun' with

the girls."

Before he settles down, before he becomes just another work-a-day-husband and family man, Jens really wants to experience life; he wants to have an adventure. So he plays jokes. He refuses to take the sacrament in church. Then, horrifyingly, he vomits into a baptismal fountain.

Martin, who is less heroic than in the American version, plays along very willingly when Jens arranges for a prostitute to jerk him off and then fellate him in a fancy restaurant. These guys are adolescents in men's bodies, feeling that, in some sense, they are kings of the world. Their involvement with a serial killer in the morgue eventually robs them of this illusion, and the film ends, finally, with Jens embracing marriage and responsibility as a "challenge" instead of juvenile pranks and hurtful, adolescent sexuality. He has finally grown up and stopped thriving on "bullshit."

Speaking of sexuality, *Nightwatch* involves a killer who likes to have sex with dead people, and who committed just such a transgression in the past, right at the morgue where Martin currently works. As part of his "dare" oriented lifestyle, Martin has sex with his girlfriend in the morgue, another act that doesn't appear in the remake. Again, this is an act that makes Martin look less heroic and far more reckless. But that's important to the film's theme, and to the serial killer's plan to frame Martin, so it works.

Nightwatch is a great film because of the manner in which it generates discomfort. Not just in the tour of the morgue, but in the vetting of the games that Martin and Jens play. These games start out innocently but graduate quickly into the terrain of public embarrassment. It's all an effort to unsettle, and the underlying idea is that Jens is on a course that, if unimpeded, may put him in the same camp as the necrophiliac serial killer. He keeps pushing the limit, keeps wanting to experience thrills, keeps wanting to try something new. This may have been the very impulse that once led a bored night watchman to first have sexual intercourse with a dead woman.

Rampant self-indulgence and the freedom to do anything can lead not just to hurt, but to perversion, *Nightwatch* suggests in subtle fashion. We all "play with destiny" at our own risk. And who knows what is lurking in the dark, just waiting to play too.

***Phantasm III: Lord of the Dead* * * ***

"The *Phantasm* franchise is always interesting, and this one is unfortunately the least interesting one of the lot. It's nice to have Michael Baldwin returning to the series along with the other actors from the original, and Angus Scrimm is a delight as always, but this film tries a little too hard to feed Reggie Bannister oneliners. The second film was a lot of fun. This one had you checking your watch occasionally."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michael Baldwin (Mike); Reggie Bannister (Reggie); Bill Thornbury (Jody Pearson); Angus Scrimm (Tall Man); Gloria Lynne Henry (Rocky); Kevin Connors (Tim); Cindy Ambuehl (Edna); John Chandler (Henry); Brooks Gardner (Rufus); Irene Roseen (Demon Nurse); Sarah Davis (Tanesha); Claire Benedek (Tim's Mother); Chuck Bhutto (Doctor); Beau Letterman (Tim's Father); Paula Irvine (Liz); Samantha Phillips (Alchemy); Kat Lester (Nurse).

CREW: Starway International presents a Don Coscarelli Film. *Castings:* Jacklyn Briskey. *Production Designer:* Ken Aichele. *Director of Photography:* Chris Chomyn. *Film Editor:* Norman Buckley. *Music:* Fredric Myrow, Christopher L. Stone. *Co-Producer:* Seth Blair. *Written, produced and directed by:* Don Coscarelli. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Michael (Baldwin) and Reggie (Bannister) escape from the devilish Tall Man (Scrimm) and make contact with Michael's brother, the long-dead Jody (Thornbury), whose soul, consciousness and brain have become trapped inside one of the Tall Man's deadly spheres. The heroes team with Rocky (Henry), a rock 'em, sock-'em, nunchuk-armed African American woman, and a little boy named Tim (Connors), who has also lost his parents to the Tall Man. Together, they follow the Tall Man's trail and prepare to confront him one last time. Meanwhile, the Tall Man focuses all of his attention on Michael...

COMMENTARY: The original *Phantasm* (1979) was one of the great horror films of the 1970s, a surreal supernatural that could be interpreted, by and large, as the anxious nightmare of a troubled

child, Michael, forced to confront the reality and presence of death in his life, embodied as a bogeyman called the Tall Man.

The sequel, 1988's *Phantasm II*, was perfectly in keeping with 1980s era excesses: a rip-roaring action epic.

The third picture in the franchise, *Phantasm III: Lord of the Dead*, is definitely a downgrade in size and scope from the previous efforts, yet notably it doesn't downsize entertainment or imagination. Though undeniably low budget, this 1990s– styled outing highlights humor, and possesses a cartoony, self-reflective side. But through it all, Coscarelli's sense of visual creativity flourishes.

Like the earlier films in this franchise, *Phantasm III: Lord of the Dead* charts the devastating impact of the Tall Man and his ghastly minions on small-town America as he harnesses ever more workers for his dimension of evil and pain. And yes, in the 1990s this aspect of the story plays very much like the Wal-Mart effect (see: *Needful Things* [1992]): a strip-mining of Main Street by a kind of ghoulish, gigantic industry.

Only in the case of the Tall Man, the industry is death itself, not the selling of cheap foreign goods. The Tall Man moves into a town with his "industrial"-sized mortuaries and it isn't long before the town is literally and metaphorically dead. Featured in *Phantasm III: Lord of the Dead* are several shots of abandoned, lifeless ghost towns, the trail that Reggie and Michael must navigate to catch their enemy.

Realizing, perhaps, that budgetary restraints limit the scope of the film, Coscarelli goes into much more detail in this film about aspects of the Tall Man's world. The viewer learns, for instance, that the deadly spheres are called "Sentinels." The film also describes and visualizes more fully the process that creates the dwarves and the sentinels. What isn't quite clear, however, is how Michael comes to possess yellow Tall Man blood. That seems like a retcon that doesn't quite work.

But *Phantasm III* flows freely from the waking world to the dreaming world and has a lot of fun with the character of Rocky (Henry), a smartmouthed, athletic black woman who fights evil in style with nunchuks. Naturally, the ever-randy Reggie wants to bed her, but she resists. "Ever try vanilla?" Reggie asks. "Dairy products give me gas," she replies.

Phantasm III also has a field day thinking up odd weapons by which to combat the gadgetry of the Tall Man. It offers razor-laced Frisbees, and, in a pinch, a toilet bowl plunger which proves surprisingly effective handling sentinels.

In all, this is a jaunty ride for a low-budget action picture, and some of the stunts are downright impressive. There's an unrestrained giddiness about the picture, as if Coscarelli just decided to have a good time, budget be damned. If not a masterpiece of horror or even of this particular franchise, *Lord of the Dead* at least keeps interest in these characters alive and ends on an intriguing cliffhanger note.

***Pumpkinhead II: Blood Wings* * * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Ami Dolenz (Jenny Braddock); Andrew Robinson (Sheriff Braddock); Steve Kanaly (Judge Dixon); J. Trevor Edmond (Danny Dixon); Caren Kaye (Beth Braddock); Linnea Quigley (Nadine); Lilyan Chauvin (Miss Osie); Gloria Hendry (Delilah Pettibone); Hill Harper (Peter); Alexander Polinsky (Paul); Joe Unger (Ernst); Roger Clinton (Mayor Bubba); Soleil Moon Frye (Marcie); Marck McCracken (Pumpkinhead); John Gatins (Young Casper Dixon); Jean-Paul Manoux (Tommy).

CREW: Live Entertainment and The Motion Picture Corp. of America Presents a Brad Krevoy, Steve Stalder Production. *Casting:* Ed Mitchell, Robyn Ray. *Creative Consultants:* Mark P. Carducci, Gary Gerani. *Production Designer:* Ivo Cristante. *Special Effects Make-up and Creatures by:* KNB Effects Group, Inc. *Film Editor:* Lauren Schaffer. *Music:* Jim Manzie. *Director of Photography:* William Dill. *Written by:* Ivan and Constantine Chachornia. *Co-Producer:* Jed Weintrob. *Produced by:* Brad Krevoy. *Directed by:* Jeff Burr. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In backwater Ferren Woods, the new sheriff (Robinson) watches his daughter, Jenny (Dolenz), who has taken up with a group of reckless local teenagers. After the adolescents kill an old woman, a vengeance demon, Pumpkinhead comes for them. Now Sheriff Braddock must face the demon eye-to-eye and reckon with a memory of it from long ago.

COMMENTARY: Stan Winston's 1989 *Pumpkinhead* is a modern genre classic, an epic hillbilly poem about the cost of vengeance on the

human soul. Painted in shades of impenetrable fog and on a canvas of gnarled, ancient trees, *Pumpkinhead* was authentically mythic, and its titular beast was a grinning, eviscerating nightmare brought to vivid, nightmarish life.

As with so many sequels made in the 1990s, *Pumpkinhead II: Blood Wings* is not in the same league as the original film.

Here, even the beast's once-impressive physical appearance has been simplified and made less so. In this film, Pumpkinhead looks like the stereotypical man-in-a-rubber suit, nothing more. Consistency and scale are stumbling blocks in terms of the creature as well: the monster's hands appear gigantic in the shots where we see only them, yet much smaller when seen attached to the fullmonster costume itself.

Adding insult to injury, *Pumpkinhead II: Blood Wings* muddies the waters regarding Pumpkinhead's particular brand of evil. In the original film, the demon could not be stopped. To stop his personified vengeance, Lance Henriksen's Ed Harley had to kill himself. Otherwise, there was no talking with Vengeance, no bargaining, no pleading. This was so, in part, because Pumpkinhead took his beastly "motivation" from the mind of the person who raised or summoned him. Only in killing that motivator, not the monster, could the beast's deadly trajectory be stopped.

But in *Pumpkinhead II*, a talkative (and miscast) town sheriff played by Andrew Robinson converses with Pumpkinhead by an old well and basically talks him out of killing his daughter, Jenny, who was one of the miscreants that caused the beast to be raised in the first place. In this case, Jenny was involved in burning down an old woman's house with other teens, and Vengeance was summoned in response. Miraculously, Pumpkinhead acquiesces to reason, and stops his attack.

In the first film, he would have lopped off the sheriff's head without a second look.

This turn of events is not only improbable it undercuts the entire spirit of the *Pumpkinhead* franchise and indeed, the first film. Perhaps Ed Harley would not have had to die if he knew he could bargain with Pumpkinhead. But clearly, that wasn't an option in that film and it shouldn't be an option here. The underlying point is meta -phorical: vengeance as an emotion is not rational; it's impulsive and destructive. It is not, in the slightest, susceptible to reasonable arguments. It wouldn't be vengeance if it were.

Blood Wings also doesn't seem to understand the method by which Pumpkinhead is actually created and raised. The deformed boy

in the film, Tommy, is described by the old witch as "the son of Pumpkinhead," meaning that some unfortunate woman must have had sexual intercourse with the Beast on one of his Earthly romps. Again, this is particularly difficult to visualize, especially in any fashion that would not result in the female's death during the act of (ahem) love. The first film established that the demon was conjured by a spell, one that involved bones buried in a particular graveyard/pumpkin patch, and the procurement of something intrinsic from the summoner's person, like a lock of hair.

But here, Tommy is actually the biological son of Pumpkinhead, who becomes raised as Pumpkinhead himself. Got it?

This is not only contradictory to the first film's storyline, it doesn't make a lick of sense in its own right. Even black magic has its rules and regulations, and it seems like double-dipping that Tommy—as avenging Pumpkinhead—should be summoned to kill Jenny and her teen friends, yet at the same time avenge Tommy's death in the 1950s.

In true 1990s fashion then, this Pumpkinhead multi-tasks.

Pumpkinhead II: Blood Wings sacrifices the demon's elegant appearance for a knock-off rubbery suit, it suggests vengeance can be swayed by talk, and then, finally, it confuses itself over the very process by which Pumpkinhead comes to be. Adding insult to injury, this sequel replaces the gloom-laden atmosphere of Winston's *Pumpkinhead* for a two-dimensional cartoon approach. In keeping with that sense of style (or lack thereof), the film casts Bill Clinton's brother, Roger Clinton, as the town mayor, and its stunt casting at its worst. And then there's the scene with the fat redneck having sex with his girlfriend (the always fetching Linnea Quigley) before Pumpkinhead attacks.

Not to get on a high-horse, but the original *Pumpkinhead* was more than just a collection of jokes and gratuitous sex. It was a meditation on the irrational things humans often do in the name of so-called "justice." *Pumpkinhead* was deadly serious, and deadly scary.

Pumpkinhead II doesn't feature one legitimately scary moment. To quote Jenny in the movie, "I don't need thrills this badly."

None of us do honey.

Puppet Master 5 (a.k.a. Puppet Master 5: The Final Chapter) * (DTV)

Cast and Crew

CAST: Gordon Currie (Rick Myers); Chandra West (Susie); Ian Ogilvy (Dr. Jennings); Teresa Hill (Lauren); Nicholas Guest (Hendy); Willard Pugh (Jason); Diane McBain (Attorney); Diane Whitaker (Scott); Guy Rolfe (Toulon); Clu Gulager (Man #1); Kaz Garas (Man #2); Harri James (Nurse); Chuck Williams (Police); James McKinnon (Sutekh).

CREW: Full Moon Entertainment presents a Jeff Burr film.

Casting: Robert MacDonald and Perry Bullington. *Puppet Effects:* David Allen. *Special Make-up and Mechanical Effects:* Michael A. Deaks. *Costume Designer:* Greg Lavoie. *Film Editor:* Margaret-Ann Smith. *Music:* Richard Band, Michael Wetherex. *Production Designer:* Milo. *Director of Photography:* Adolfo Bartoli. *Written by:* Steven E. Carr, Douglas Aarniokoski, Jo Duffy, Todd Henschell, Kenneth S. Payson. *Produced by:* Charles Band. *Directed by:* Jeff Burr. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Now the new puppet master, genius Rick Myers (Currie), is arrested for the murder of his friends at the Bodega Bay Inn, as well as the scientists at Biotech's Omega Project. Meanwhile, a new acting director at Biotech, Dr. Jennings (Ogilvy), attempts to acquire Toulon's puppets at the Inn to further the company's plans for artificial intelligence. At the same time, Sutekh (McKinnon) sends another minion—a "pharaoh"—to kill the puppets and those in the "Up world" who have learned the secret of animating life. Comatose in a hospital, Lauren (Hill) attempts to warn Rick and Susie (West) about the evil from the nether realm.

COMMENTARY: Blade, Jester, Pinhead, Torch, Tunneler, Six Shooter and Decapitron return in a *Puppet Master* sequel that pits Toulon's creations against not just demons from the underworld, but avaricious corporate businessmen of the 1990s. Unfortunately, this entry, filmed back to back with *Puppet Master 4: The Demon*, continues the downward trajectory of the direct-to-video franchise. A repeat story, lackluster human characters, and a lengthy re-cap all contribute to a feeling that the franchise has run out of creative juice, not to mention money.

Puppet Master 5 begins with the interesting idea that Rick Myers, the new puppet master as selected by the spectral Toulon (still Guy Rolfe, here in an extended cameo), has been arrested for the murders

committed by Sutekh's minions in the previous entry. But after about twenty-minutes, that plot line gets dropped for a re-hash of *The Demon's* plot, which involves a Sutekh demon stalking the puppets in the Bodega Bay Inn. Even the manner of destroying the demon is the same: utilizing new puppet Decapitron to electrify him in battle with his special electronic head attachment.

Although this was the finale of the previous picture and occurred less than a week earlier, story time, it still takes fifty-eight minutes of running time for Myers to think of using Decapitron. And worse, he only comes up with the notion of doing what he did the week before in the same exact situation after receiving a psychic message from Lauren, who spends, literally, the entire film in a hospital bed experiencing bad dreams.

Also, irritatingly, *Puppet Master 5* rehashes *Puppet Master 4's* coda. Here—as there—Toulon comes to life on Decapitron's unformed head and tells Rick that he is the new puppet master and that he must protect Toulon's secrets against evildoers. In other words, it takes roughly eighty minutes to arrive at the exact same conclusion as the previous conclusion. Talk about narrative circles...

Puppet Master 5 also features some strange incongruities with previous pictures. For instance, Torch miraculously shows up in this entry, inside the Bodega Bay Inn, after having been missing in action since Part 2. Where he came from or where Myers found him is not explained.

Secondly, Rick explains Sutekh's desire to protect the secret of animating life, but in the scenes with Sutekh, he seems to have a different motive this time. Here, he says he wants his minion to steal the secret of animating life, which apparently he doesn't know. This is a clear discontinuity with Rick's dialogue, and also with the set-up of the previous film.

Jeff Burr, who directed Part 4, returns for this film but he seems to be working in molasses. The movie consists of interminable sequences of puppets, thugs, minions and young adults wandering the dark hallways of the Inn ... and that's about it. Slowing down the proceedings even further, the movie stops cold early on for a five-minute re-cap and flashback of the events of *The Demon*. A five-minute flashback diversion in an eighty minute movie is a considerable one and reinforces the notion that this movie has been padded out to feature length with little original storyline to carry it.

Once more—it seems worth nothing that these later *Puppet Masters* are undercut, to a large degree, by underwhelming casting. Gordon Currie returns as new puppet master Rick, but the audience

knows almost nothing about him beyond the fact that, purportedly, he's extremely intelligent.

Yet he's not intelligent enough to keep Decapitron close at hand.

Not intelligent enough to destroy the Ouija board that seems to connect the Underworld to his hotel. Not intelligent enough to keep an eye on Lauren, who so far has been 100 percent accurate about her psychic predictions and early warnings of demon visitations.

Not intelligent enough to see through Jennings, and so on. Myers is just a bland, empty character and not worthy of the honorific of puppet master.

As before, Dave Allen and Michael Deaks have achieved wonders on a low budget with their familiar creations. For those keeping track, this entry features a freaky, Freudian dream sequence involving a bathtub, Tunneler and Lauren (which leads, naturally, to a "stay awake" moment). Jester also gets to bash a guy in the nuts with a hammer. Blade and Torch battle the evil diminutive demon successfully, and Decapitron gets used the exact same way, though he gets a new head attachment that allows him to scan the hotel for the demon.

Other than those flourishes with Toulon's puppets, this sequel is about as by-the-numbers as you can get.

The Puppet Masters * *

Critical Reception

"A worthy screen adaptation of the Heinlein novel.... [T]he scenes depicting troops and armored personnel carriers moving through the streets of an American city are especially ominous and consonant with paranoid scenarios of military takeovers of the United States espoused by the conspiracy-minded."—Paul Meehan, *Saucer Movies*, Scarecrow Press, 1998, page 273

Cast and Crew

CAST: Donald Sutherland (Andrew Nivens); Eric Thal (Sam Nivens); Julie Warner (Mary Sefton); Keith David (Holland); Will Patton (Graves); Richard Belzer (Neil Jarvis); Marshall Bell (General

Morgan); Yaphet Kotto (Ressler); Tom Mason (President Douglas); Nicholas Cascone (Greenberg); Bruce Jarchow (Barnes); Andrew Robinson (Bruce); Benjamin Mouton (Higgins); Am Sanderson (Culbertson); J. Patrick McCormack (Gedding); David Paques (Vargas); Benj Thall (Jeff).

CREW: Hollywood Pictures Presents a film by Stuart Orme.

Casting: Sharon Howard-Field. *Music:* Colin Towns. *Costume Designer:* Tom Bronson. *Film Editor:* William Goldenberg. *Production Designer:* Daniel A. Lomino. *Director of Photography:* Clive Tickner. *Special Visual Effects:* Buena Vista Fx. *Executive Producer:* Michael Engelberg. *Based on the novel by:* Robert A. Heinlein. *Written by:* Ted Elliott, Terry Russo, David S. Goyer. *Produced by:* Ralph Winters. *Directed by:* Stuart Orme. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 109 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A government sponsored team led by Andrew Nivens (Sutherland) travels to Ambrose, Iowa, to investigate the apparent landing of a UFO in farm country. Before long, Andrew, his security specialist and son, Sam (Thal), and xenobiologist Mary Sefton (Warner) discover that alien parasites have taken control of the local residents, overriding human nervous systems. Nivens' team foils an attempt by the aliens to subvert the president of the United States at a Digital Age conference, but the alien contamination is spreading at an exponential rate...

COMMENTARY: *The Puppet Masters*, Robert Heinlein's tale of alien invasion, was first published in *Galaxy Science Fiction* in late 1951 and therefore it pre-dated Jack Finney's similar *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Still, it took Hollywood some forty-three years to get around to adapting *The Puppet Masters* as a film. As crafted by Heinlein, the original book commented on communism, equating it to an extra-terrestrial hive mind during the time of the Cold War.

By the mid-1990s, the Cold War with communist Russia was over, and therefore much of Heinlen's subtext involving communism was no longer operative. The movie version of the film instead focuses squarely on action, and this is part of its problem. The film's final act resolves the invasion of alien "slugs" with a climactic gunfight that is nothing special or involving. That moment is followed by a sting-in-the-tale/tail featuring horrible matte work during a helicopter chase, as the last alien attempts escape.

Forget the specifics of these scenes, however; it's virtually impossible to believe that the U.S. (or any Earthbound military) could

function quickly enough to take out these invaders, which co-opt humans at lightning speed, and which, by film's climax, already have a foothold here on Earth. The ending in *The Puppet Masters* reeks of Hollywood happy endings.

Although it concentrates on action scenes, *The Puppet Masters* does an admirable job of depicting the frightening alien slugs and their impact on the human organism. These squirming, multi-tentacled parasites move very convincingly for the most part, and the film does a good job of explaining their alien nature. The parasites are 60 percent brain tissue, plus a "probe" like an insect stinger that interfaces with humans, their slaves. The slugs have no sensory organs of their own, and the aliens produce adrenalin in the host organisms, meaning that they make humans incredibly strong.

More frightening, the slugs are like "puppets pulling strings" overriding human nervous systems so that unlucky hosts are aware of everything that their body is doing but are unable to interfere or stop it. It's a nightmare.

The movie reaches its dramatic apex when it begins to speculate on the fact that humans, for some reason, feel empty after losing their alien masters. One man, freed from slavery, promptly kills himself rather than face life without the slug. The inference is that the aliens fulfill some sort of basic human need. Also, the movie brings up the idea of withdrawal from drugs—that losing the aliens is a similar process.

Robert Heinlein's novel had overt sexual overtones regarding the aliens (in particular, they discovered and liked sex), but the movie doesn't make much of this interesting aspect, alas. Instead, during a scene in which Mary (Warner) and Sam (Thal) begin to get busy, the audience sees one of the slugs perched on her back, which is a grotesque and troubling image. One wishes the film looked more closely at what this meant. Do aliens have desires? Do they like sex?

The Puppet Masters is a pretty straightforward genre film, especially for the age of conspiracies and *The X-Files*. The government discovers aliens invading Earth, investigates the aliens and ultimately stops them, destroying their headquarters (which resembles a giant piece of string cheese). As noted by Paul Meehan, some scenes of the military taking residence in Middle America have an ominous feel to them, but not enough.

Just about the only element of real fun here arises from the genre casting. Donald Sutherland (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), Keith David (John Carpenter's *The Thing*) and Yaphet Kotto (*Alien*) have all battled hidden, shape-shifting, cinematic aliens before, so they make a

good and familiar team in *Puppet Masters*.

Similarly, Warner and Thal make for very likeable, very attractive leads, and much of the writing is whip-smart. Yet *Puppet Masters* somehow doesn't seem as dangerous as it should. It's an alien invasion in a minor-key, all nicely wrapped up in the end. The result is a film that isn't nearly as scary as it should be, especially with such intriguing monsters on our backs.

***The River Wild* * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Meryl Streep (Gail); Kevin Bacon (Wade); David Strathairn (Tom); Joseph Mazzello (Roarke); John C. Reilly (Terry); Benjamin Bratt (Ranger Johnny); Elizabeth Hoffman (Gail's Mom); William Lucking (Frank); Stephanie Sawyer (Willa); Victor H. Galloway (Gail's Father).

CREW: Universal Pictures presents a Turman-Foster Company production of a Curtis Hanson film. *Casting:* Nancy Klover. *Costume Designer:* Marlene Stewart. *Music:* Jerry Goldsmith. *Film Editors:* Joe Hutshing, David Brenner. *Production Designer:* Bill Kenney. *Director of Photography:* Robert Elswit. *Executive Producer:* Ilona Herzbug, Ray Hatwick. *Written by:* Dennis O'Neill. *Produced by:* David Foster, Lawrence Turman. *Directed by:* Curtis Hanson. *MPAA Rating:* PG. *Running time:* 108 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A family vacations on a river out west for son Roarke's (Mazzello) birthday, even as parents Gail (Streep) and Tom (Strathairn) deal with differences over how much quality time to spend together. The family runs afoul on the river of two robbers, the charismatic Wade (Bacon) and his buddy (Reilly). With the police in pursuit, these two criminals need Gail, an ex-guide on the river, to lead them safely through the dangerous rapids of the "Gauntlet." At first Gail refuses to assist, but soon Wade threatens her husband and son.

COMMENTARY: Curtis Hanson's *The River Wild* is another example of the popular interloper formula in 1990 horror thrillers. Here, an

affluent, middle-class family's vacation and associated return to nature is imperiled by two working-class criminals who, on a surging river, need a lift. Although interlopers tend to be women, for the most part, in the case of *The River Wild*, Wade (Kevin Bacon) steps in to help guide a son whose father doesn't know when to put down his work.

Tom, the family patriarch played by David Strathairn, is a work-a-holic who can't make time for the outdoors, or for his son's birthday. Although Tom loves his family, he is "too busy." With his glasses, his wiry physique, his milquetoast attitude, and his dominant, physically-active wife, it's clear that American fatherhood is in jeopardy here, a response, perhaps, to what many writers have called the "feminization" of the culture in the 1990s.

Interestingly, Tom's wife, Meryl Streep's Gail, and Wade seem to have more in common. They are gregarious, fun, spontaneous individuals who clearly enjoy physical recreation and exertion (a metaphor, perhaps, for sex).

On arrival at the river, young and impressionable Roarke begins to see Wade as the kind of father he would like to have. He's a "different sort of nice guy" according to Roarke. And then Wade one-ups Tom by giving the boy two-hundred dollars in cash for his birthday.

Wade also brings Roarke into his confidence. He takes him onto his boat and tells him a "secret": he's carrying a .357 Magnum. Because Wade "trusts" Roarke with this secret, the boy begins to look up to him as a role model instead of his own father. At least until matters turn violent. The bottom line is a convention of the interloper form: at first, kids always think the interloper figure is cool. This is often because the interloper is deliberately manipulative, or acting out of an ulterior motive other than parental responsibility.

In *The River Wild*, the family unit is ultimately re-established after Wade shows his true colors and attempts to kill the family dog (the pet is always endangered early in interloper films; see: *Cape Fear*, *Single White Female*) and Tom. Tom regains the respect of his son and wife when he shows that he is physically capable: arranging a bottom-of-the-gauntlet booby-trap for Wade and "trusting" his family to read the pictogram message he has scrawled on a Cliffside rock.

Hanson's film works in large part because of the hard-hitting, outdoor locations and natural views that dominate the movie. *The River Wild* doesn't boast the cut-throat brutality of *Deliverance* (1972), for instance, but proves an admirable PG-13 alternative. Instead of focusing on the violent clash between Wade and the family for its duration, the film instead goes to dramatic lengths to depict the

dangers of the river, of "The Gauntlet."

Much of the film's expository dialogue involves the Gauntlet, a difficult "5" rowing challenge and the place where three rivers drop 295 feet in a mile and a half. The photography involving the white-water raft and its trajectory through "the Gauntlet" is never less than stunning here. It is, in fact, breathtaking. The action is made tense (the point of an interloper film) by the fact that a child, Roarke, is aboard the raft, and Wade has tied him down. If the boat flips or goes down, the boy dies.

There's also a barely enunciated sexual subtext in *The River Wild* that, more clearly spoken, would have made the film even stronger. Wade and Gail are two-of-a-kind, emotional and physical people. On at least two occasions, Hanson stages sequences that put Streep in a sexually submissive position, in front of and beneath the looming, powerful Bacon.

Later, he watches her skinny dip, and kind of looks lustfully at her. But because this is a PG-13 movie, nothing ever comes of it. That's a shame because so much of *The River Wild's* text involves Tom's apparent inadequacy as a man, father and husband since he places computer jockeying and the job over physical endeavors like white-water rafting. A more overt sexual line would have made this point even clearer. A thief and a charismatic interloper, it's clear that Wade wants more than navigation from Gail.

The River Wild could have been an even better film if it did not rely on some easy gimmickry in its plotting. For instance, one of Gail's parents is deaf, so everyone in the family speaks sign language. This fact gives Gail, Roarke and Tom a clear advantage over Wade, and minimizes, at points, the movie's sense of terror.

Still, this film's last act is pretty harrowing, and *The River Wild* reveals that in the 1990s interlopers were everywhere. Not just in the American middle-class home (*The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*), not just on the job (*The Temp*), but even on vacation!

***Subspecies 3: Bloodlust* * * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Anders Hove (Radu); Denice Duff (Michelle); Melanie Shatner (Rebecca); Kevin Blair (Mel); Pamela Gordon (Mummy);

Michael Dellafemina (Bob); Ion Haiduc (Lt. Marin); Michael Denish (Popescu); Nicolae Urs (Policeman); Radu Minulescu (Policeman); Elvira Deatcu (Woman Victim); Camelia Zorlescu (Popescu's Secretary); Theodor Danetti (Innkeeper); Florin Ionescu (Violin Boy); Rodica Horobet (Woman in Car).

CREW: Full Moon Entertainment presents a Ted Nicolaou film. *Casting:* Robert MacDonald, Perry Bullington. *Production Designer:* Radu Corciova. *Art Director:* Ioana Curcuiova. *Costume Designer:* Oana Paunescu. *Special Make-up Effects:* Alchemy Effects, Michael S. Deak, Wayne Toth. *Film Editors:* Bert Glatsan, Gregory Sanders. *Based on an original idea by:* Charles Band. *Music:* Richard Kosinski, Michael Portis. *Director of Photography:* Vlad Paunescu. *Executive Producer:* Charles Band. *Produced by:* Vlad and Oana Paunescu. *Written and directed by:* Ted Nicolaou. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 80 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Michelle (Duff), a fledgling vampire, is transported to the castle home of Radu (Hoves), where he instructs her in the way of the undead. Meanwhile, Rebecca (Shatner), Mel (Blair) and Lt. Marin (Haiduc) storm the castle in an attempt to rescue her. A lovestruck Radu makes a fateful choice involving his mother (Gordon), but Michelle repays his kindness by attempting to destroy him.

COMMENTARY: Opening with a quick re-cap of the second film—as though the saga were a serial or chapter play from the 1930s—*Subspecies 3: Bloodlust* continues the misadventures of sloppy, big-handed Romanian vampire Radu (Anders Hove) and his would-be bride, the lovely Michelle (Denice Duff). This is likely the best of the *Subspecies* films in part because it focuses mostly on the characters and their dilemmas.

For instance, Radu goes through the wringer for the love of his fledgling here. A kind of vampiric giving tree, Radu keeps sacrificing for Michelle in the hopes that she will turn her affections to him. In the film's final scene, he even chooses this woman over his mother in a bloody confrontation.

And though Radu repeatedly informs Michelle that she must "sever" her ties "to mortality" and that "there is no love between the living and dead," the newly-turned vampire still holds on to love of sister and humanity at the expense of her master. When Radu informs Michelle that he will love her until the end of time, she rebuffs him cruelly and notes that she will hate him "for all eternity."

When Michelle asks how a vampire may be killed, a haunted-looking Radu tells her that there are many ways to die, and he seems to have "lived" all of them.

At the same time, the movie also provides Shatner's Rebecca an impediment to intimacy. She develops post-traumatic stress syndrome after her close encounter with Radu, and so she can't get it on with Mel, the film's hunky American Embassy worker.

Like an episode of *Dark Shadows*, or of an old serial, you ultimately come to hang on every word. The *Subspecies* films don't provide big stunts, big scares or dramatic scenes of spectacle, but they do offer, at least up to a point, a compelling storyline about three characters. Because the scope is contained, these characters get a lot of play, and the sometimes silly Radu even emerges here as a kind of tragic hero.

Again, it's an expectation game, and by the time you get to this second sequel, those expectations are in check, and you just want to see what happens next to Michelle and Radu.

On a technical front, this movie seems more assured than either predecessor. After the opening recap, there's a nifty tilt from ground level down to the subterranean catacombs where Mommy Mummy (Gordon) lords it over a slumbering Michelle. It's an imaginative shot, and the film has many of them, particularly during Radu's traumatic death sequence at the end of the film. Nicolaou seems more assured of himself here than ever, and he even stages a kind of touching shot of Radu and Michelle lying side-by-side in the crypt. Fans of the series may also appreciate the fact that Melanie Shatner does an unexpected nude scene in *Bloodlust*.

Probably the most disappointing aspect of the film involves the series' trademark "shadow" shots. For some reason all such shots are animated with cartoon shadows in this sequel, and therefore they are much less impressive. That established, Nicolaou provides some nifty teleporting effects as Michelle learns the tricks of the vampire trade.

If you're going to watch the *Subspecies* movies, I suggest you watch the first three together. They actually end up being more than the sum of their individual parts; they even tell a rather compelling, personal story. I can't point out an entry as being particularly good in and of itself, but together they forge an interesting tapestry.

Unfortunately, much of the always-improving work vetted by the two sequels is undercut, and momentum is lost in *Subspecies 4: Bloodstorm*.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation (a.k.a. The Return of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre) * * *

Critical Reception

" *Next Generation's* main problem is its inability to find a consistent tone: It can't decide whether it's a horror spoof or a straightforward slasher film, so its few scenes of dark humor are invariably interspersed with dreary, forgettable scenes of Zellweger running away from the cannibal's house with chainsaw-wielding maniacs in dogged pursuit. Similarly problematic is *Next Generation's* inconsistent government-conspiracy subplot: Throughout the film, it's suggested that the family of cannibals is working for some sort of giant governmental conspiracy, but nothing ever really comes of it. The two stars are terrific, though: Zellweger's plucky heroine is likable and sympathetic, while McConaughey's over-the-top turn as a redneck psycho shows that if he continues to hone his craft and choose his scripts wisely, he could have a future as a character actor in low-budget slasher films."—Nathan Rabin, *The AV Club*, March 22, 2002, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/the-texaschainsaw-massacre-the-next-generation,19639/>

"Its wretchedness is so complete it can't help but attract bad-movie addicts the way a dead skunk draws flies. The script, such as it is, establishes a new benchmark for incoherence. Something about some teens who wander away on prom night and run up against a family of psycho-cannibal-thrill-killers."—Margaret McGurk, *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, "Chainsaw Comes Back to Haunt Stars," <http://cincinnati.com/freetime/movies/mcgurk/chainsaw.html>

"Although sometimes funny at the film's expense, much of this 1994 production contains clever humor built through snappy dialogue and the creation of incongruent characters."—Karen Achenbach, *Box Office Magazine*, August 1, 2008, <http://boxoffice.com/reviews/2008/08/texas-chainsaw-massacre-the-ne.php>

"As it stands now, the film is a knowing horror picture that builds on our knowledge of the three *Chainsaw* predecessors but also keeps its tongue firmly planted in its cheek at all times. Writer-director Kim Henkel penned the original *Chainsaw* and this effort shows that he still has a felicitous grasp of the things that cause us to shudder in dread. There are also most of the familiar conventions of the horror film: prom night, meat hooks, and, of course, chainsaws. But this time out we also discover that Leatherface (Jacks) is a sensitive cross-dresser, that his tightly wound brother Vilmer (McConaughey) is the real threat in the family, and that the backwoods clan is in some kind of dastardly cahoots with respectable-seeming businessmen. The performances here are uniformly fun, from the over-the-top Vilmer and his mechanical leg contraption that jerks his unwilling limb in uncontrollable Dr. Strangelove-like motions, to Vilmer's exhibitionist girlfriend Darla (Perenski) who lends a comedic air to all she does, to the determined pluck of prom-night heroine Jenny (Zellweger), to the plaintive demeanor of the beskirted Leatherface."—Marjorie Baumgarten, *The Austin Chronicle*, October 17, 1997, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Calendar/Film?Film=oid%3a141288>

Cast and Crew

CAST: Renee Zellweger (Jenny); Matthew Mc-Conaughey (Vilmer); Robert Jacks (Leatherface); Tonia Perenski (Darla); Joe Stevens (W.E.); Lisa Newmyer (Heather); Tyler Cane (Bartley); John Harrison (Sean); James Gale (Rothman); Chris Kigrev (Chauffer); Paul Partain (Hospital Orderly); Patient in Gurney (Anonymous).

CREW: Ultra Muchus Inc and River City Films Inc., Present a Robert J. Kuhn Production. *Casting:* Isabelle Emmanuelle Coulet. *Director of Photography:* Deborah Pastor. *Costume Designer:* Kari Perkins. *Music:* Wayne Bell. *Director of Photography:* Levie Isaacks. *Film Editor:* Sandra Adair. *Executive Producer:* Robert J. Kuhn. *Produced by:* Robert J. Kuhn and Kim Henkel. *Written and directed by:* Kim Henkel. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

INCANTATION: "We definitely feel that Columbia/Tri Star has not done what they agreed to do in terms of trying to market this film in the best possible fashion. They have not tried to exploit this film to monetarily benefit us as they should have. They've just low-keyed it. They don't want to be guilty of exploiting Matthew because of their relationship with CAA, which is the strongest single force in

Hollywood these days. You get on the wrong side of them, you're in trouble."⁴⁹— *Next Generation* producer Robert Kuhn describes the difficulties involving Matthew McConaughey that kept the fourth chainsaw film out of theaters for several years

SYNOPSIS: On prom night, May 22, 1996, four teens end up in a car wreck in central Texas and run afoul of a family of cannibals related to the infamous criminals of August 1973. Now leading the brood is the insane, bionic-legged Vilmer (McConaughey), and his mainstreamed girlfriend, Darla (Perenski). The chainsaw wielding Leatherface is part of the gang too, as is a literature-quoting madman named W.E. (Stevens). One teenager, Jenny (Zellweger), survives a night of madness only to learn that Vilmer is telling the truth when he claims that powers far greater than he have orchestrated it all.

COMMENTARY: One fascinating aspect of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* franchise is the manner in which filmmakers have periodically updated the franchise premise to keep it timely.

In the Nixonian 1970s, Tobe Hooper and writer Kim Henkel created a surreal nightmare about an America literally and figuratively "out of gas." The film featured an unemployed family in rural Texas surviving on cannibalism.

The 1980s sequel was a product of the Reagan Revolution, with Cook, Leatherface and Chop-Top—still unrepentant cannibals—acting as entrepreneurs, running a small business, and complaining about Federal taxes.

Then Kim Henkel took the reins of the film franchise after 1990's *Leatherface*, in *Texas Chainsaw: The Next Generation*, and once more, reimagined the mythos, this time in keeping with several elements of 1990s culture.

In particular, Henkel's film suggests that the once-clandestine cannibalistic family has aggressively moved into the open and found some degree of acceptance. This is the new era of "tolerance," after all.

Following his adolescence (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre II*) Leatherface has finally settled on a sexual identity too: he's a girl. In point of fact, Leatherface now resembles former First Lady Barbara Bush, right down to her white mane, pearl necklace and grandmotherly attire.

Meanwhile, matriarch Darla works in a real estate construction office and brings home pizza and fast-food to her "boys," all while

keeping teenage prisoners locked up in her car trunk. She does this under the eyes of the police, who are oblivious to her crimes.

Most interestingly of all, however, Vilmer seems to operate a business "franchise" in acquiring (a euphemism for kidnapping) young victims for the rich clients of a secret organization not unlike the Vampire Nation in *Blade* (1988) or the exclusive sex club of the uber-wealthy in Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). On Vilmer's pick-up truck is visible the legend "Illuminati," and that's the audiences signal that, well, *it's a company car* and Vilmer is involved in a conspiracy.

Illuminati, which means "enlightenment," may also refer to a secret society, a conspiracy of wealthy elites who, in the 1990s—and even today—are believed to be toiling to create George Bush's so-called "New World Order." These conspiracy theorists will inform you that George Bush, Sr., was in Texas the day of the Kennedy assassination, that NAFTA was part of a grand plan to create an "America" spanning Canada, the United States and Mexico, and that his "New World Order" speech on September 11, 1990, was a harbinger of the One World Government (still to come).

In some byzantine way, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation*—getting real juice from the conspiracy-minded 1990s (which also brought us *The X-Files*)—attempts to connect all these dots for the audience. Vilmer mentions the Kennedy assassination, which occurred in Texas, of course, just like the film. And Leatherface, as I mentioned above, looks like a dead ringer for Barbara Bush here during a few scenes. Plus—*I kid you not*—one of the other killers in the cannibal family is named "W" (Stevens), and of course, when the film was made in 1994, George "W" Bush was rising to prominence, campaigning to be governor of Texas. So, if you're so inclined to read the clues, there's a connection to the Bush family and its purported role in the international conspiracy here.

Then there's Vilmer's "Illuminati"-labeled truck, and the film's final act, which stages a visit from one of these elite "tourists." In this valedictory sequence there's quite a surprise. Vilmer is no conspiracy nut: he really does work for a secret society! And furthermore, the capture of Jenny (Zellweger) and her friends was in the service of this exploitative society. A limo pulls up outside the house and one of the Elites steps out—a freak himself, one with a pierced abdomen and strange (Masonic?) markings on his chest. Later, this elite businessman—who paid Vilmer to "use" Jenny—expresses disappointment in the whole enterprise. "It was supposed to be a spiritual experience," he notes. "Perhaps it is disappointment that keeps us going..."

What this whole subplot suggests is a secret hierarchy of

vampiric elites: ones who employ locals (Vilmer and his family) to acquire real people to be used in grotesqueries unnamed and unspecified. But however it works, in the decade of *The X-Files*, the "Vast Right Wing Conspiracy," "The New World Order" and all the alleged Clinton Conspiracies (drug dealing, murder, etc.), *The Next Generation's* plot line is relevant.



Leatherface chooses a sex (female!) in the promotional poster for *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation*.

The seemingly random violence of the cannibal family in the 1970s has been harnessed by, essentially, a secret organization, and now it happens *every day* while authorities—under the auspices of political correctness and tolerance of diversity—turn a blind eye to what's happening. Although Vilmer fears that the FBI has his house under surveillance (think Waco), he's wrong: the establishment is behind the Illuminati, so it's not likely he'll be stopped.

In addition to the nineties-skewing update of the very *Chainsaw* premise, this *Chainsaw* movie is good with the details. One room in Vilmer's house features a wall of a thousand keys, ostensibly from all the wayward travelers who saw this house as their last stop before final disposition with the Illuminati.

The film's sense of humor works too. One very funny scene involves a war for the use of Vilmer's hydraulic leg, which operates via remote control. Vilmer and Jenny keep pressing buttons on TV remotes to control the embattled limb.

As for the film's central "teens," they are indeed banal and stupid, but the movie seems to understand this and writes their dialogue accordingly. "Those assholes don't know how to make roads," says Barry, one of the insipid teens, after getting lost on the road.

That arrogant but ignorant line captures the teens' self-involved and hostile nature perfectly.

Horror enthusiasts, in general, seem not to have enjoyed this sequel much, perhaps because the 1990s context was not as plain at the time of the movie's release as it seems today, upon retrospect. Or perhaps it is because the teens are so unlikable, so dumb, so easy to hate.

Yet there's a lot to appreciate here. The conspiracy-angle breathes new life into a familiar story, and the performances, especially by McConaughey and Zellweger, are strong. Additionally, the movie evidences a sharp wit, and there's even a sense of homage too, to franchise history.

On the latter front, the film's final scene, set at a hospital, reunites original *Chain Saw* stars Marilyn Burns, Paul Partain and John Dugan. There, very briefly, Sally Hardesty and this film's final girl, Jenny, pass each other on gurneys, and two generations of *Chainsaw* terror are joined. It's a sweet little grace note at the end of a grueling roller-coaster and the perfect capper for the last *Chainsaw* movie of the 1990s.

LEGACY: Before *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation* could get a release, both of its young stars, Rene Zellweger and Matthew McConaughey, became huge stars. After this development, the movie mysteriously became more difficult to release, the result of a real-life conspiracy by Hollywood agencies not to "harm" two up-and-coming stars with the release of a lowbudget horror movie.

The Unborn 2 * * .

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michele Greene (Catherine Moore); Scott Valentine (John Edison); Robin Curtis (Linda Holt); Leonard D. Turner (Detective Briggs); Michael James McDonald (Welfare Worker #1); Darryl Henridues (Artie Phillips); Cardle Ita White (Marge Phillips); Brittney Powell (Sally Ann); Ameliza Scott (Officer Craig); Sheila Travis (Welfare Worker #2); Jill Pierce (Young Mother); Ron Melendez (Rick); Lori Lively (Maternity Ward Nurse); Bob McFarland (Cop).

CREW: New Horizons Presents a film by Rick Jacobson. *Casting:* Laura Schiff. *Co-Producer:* Scott Phillip Levy. *Music:* John Graham. *Production Designer:* Robin Nixon. *Director of Photography:* Mike Gallagher. *Film Editor:* John Gilbert. *Story:* Rob Kerchner. *Written by:* Mark Evan Schwartz, Danielle Percell. *Produced by:* Mike Elliott. *Executive Producer:* Roger Corman. *Directed by:* Rick Jacobson. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 84 minutes.

P.O.V.: "All people care about is goddamn cars, how they look, how much money they've got, because they're all so materialistic...."—John (Scott Valentine) decries the indifference of American society at large in the sequel, *The Unborn 2*

SYNOPSIS: While single-mother Catherine Moore (Greene), a former patient of Dr. Meyerling's, hides in upscale suburbia with her genetically engineered baby, Joey, another former patient of

Meyerling's, Linda Holt (Curtis), goes on a killing spree, murdering all of the monstrous progeny. When Linda comes for Joey, Catherine and her deformed baby are defended by a helpful neighbor, John (Valentine), a man also hiding secrets. After Joey turns murderous by killing his babysitter, Sally Ann (Powell), and her boyfriend, Rick (Melendez), it's a battle between Holt and Catherine to determine the future of the baby, and perhaps human life on Earth.

COMMENTARY: This action-packed sequel to *The Unborn* has some real momentum going for it, but not a whole lot more. That momentum emerges from the presence of actress Robin Curtis as an out-for-blood, avenging-mother with a gun. With a no-nonsense attitude, this character goes from genetically-engineered baby to genetically engineered baby, gunning them down with extreme prejudice.

In one scene, Curtis's character, Linda Holt, opens fire in a maternity ward, and there's a violent shoot-out between police officers and this *Terminator*-style figure, all with helpless infants in close proximity. Afterwards, Curtis sews up a bullet wound and gets back to her bloody business. In a sense, Linda is a pro-choicer with an attitude: delivering retro-active abortions on evolved monstrosity after monstrosity at the barrel of a gun.

On the opposite side of the equation is Scott Valentine's mealy-mouthed John Edison, a man devoted to keeping the genetically-engineered, monster babies alive and well. He mourns what he sees as a sort of spiritual death of America and wants more than anything to see life—even monstrous life—flourish. So yep, John's the pro-life component of the film, and by movie's end he's just as violent and psychotic as Linda is. "Survival of the fittest time!" he quips.

Between the two polarized, culture-war viewpoints of John and Linda stands the *Unborn 2*'s torn, middle-of-the-road heroine, mother Catherine Moore (Michelle Greene). Her telepathic baby, Joey, has hypnotized her into taking care of him. Catherine also rejects Linda's entreaties to kill the child. By the end of the film, however, following Joey's attempt on her life, Mom is ready for action. She blows up her house in perfect suburbia, baby included.

So what is *The Unborn 2*'s perspective on abortion? Well, between the action scenes and explosions, the film seems to suggest that people should just ... be reasonable. Catherine wants to protect and nourish innocent life as long as she can. But when that innocent

life proves a physical danger to her, she acts to terminate, a metaphor for pro-choice language protecting "the safety of the mother." Perhaps that's the one line everyone can agree on, or could agree on back in the 1990s.

One thing's for sure: *The Unborn 2* isn't boring. Silly and dopey at times, yes, but certainly not boring.

***Wes Craven's New Nightmare* * * * ***

Critical Reception

"The major achievement of the film, given the complicated mix of in-jokery and philosophy and the by-now familiar nature of Freddy's schtick, is that Craven manages to make things scary again."—Kim Newman, *Sight and Sound*, January 1, 1995, page 62

"It works brilliantly both as a horror film (it's not that scary, but it's ingenious and startling) and as a meditation on genre conventions.... In fact, it's probably the first film to examine explicitly the sequel as a genre in itself."—Johnathan Romney, *New Statesman and Society*, January 6, 1995, page 33

"This rippling good movie-within-a-movie, a pop *Day for Nightmare*, revives the razor-fingered, dream-haunting Freddy Krueger.... In addition to Craven's technical virtuosity, what places him in the pantheon of great contemporary horroreasters—David Cronenberg, John Carpenter and George Romero—is his ability to hook into our fears."—Thelma Adams, *The New York Post*, October 14, 1994

"Looking back, it now seems kind of inevitable that someone would give at least one of the big-name franchises a self-reflexive makeover in the nineties, and despite some of *New Nightmare's* shortcomings, its audacity is infectious. With or without the postmodern conceit, Wes Craven's return as writer/director was bound to inject authenticity, credibility and dozens of long-lost IQ points, throwing *Elm Street's* litany of tedious, unfrightening sequels into sharp relief. There's no shortage of *frisson* here with

Craven, Robert Englund, John Saxon and various producers appearing as themselves, but it's often seriously hobbled by leading lady Heather Langenkamp, who gives her usual slack-jawed, wading-through-a-swamp performance, and I'm surely not the first to point out how curiously unconvincing she is even while playing herself. From Craven's low-budget early efforts to his studio pictures, he has always shown a particularly strong instinct for casting, but Langenkamp remains one of his few thoroughly inexplicable choices."—John Bowen, *Rue Morgue*

"A neat idea nicely delivered by Wes Craven but the biggest surprise here was Heather Langenkamp, whose acting skills had matured significantly since her last appearance in the series. Freddy Krueger seemed a little more menacing than he'd been in some of the more recent *Elm Street* films, less the punch-line delivering parody he'd become. The series had run its course a few films back and Craven breathed some new life into it here."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"An admirable attempt by Craven to reboot his landmark *Elm Street* saga and which succeeds pretty well for the most part. Robert Englund is more menacing than ever as a reinvented 'real life' Freddy, although Heather Langenkamp isn't what anyone would ever call a dependable leading lady. This deconstructionist take on the slasher genre would act as Craven's dress rehearsal for *Scream* some two years later."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Heather Langenkamp (Herself); Miko Hughes (Dylan); Wes Craven (Himself); Marianne Maddalena (Herself); Tracy Middendorf (Julie); John Saxon (Himself); Robert Englund (Himself/ Freddy Krueger); Robert Shaye(Himself); Sara Risher (Herself); W. Earl Brown (Morgue Attendant); Matt Winston (Chuck); Rob La Belle (Terry); David Newsom (Chase Porter); Cully Fredrickson (Limo Driver).

CREW: A New Line Cinema release of a Wes Craven film. *Casting:* Gary Zuckerbrod. *Based on characters created by:* Wes Craven. *Production Designer:* Cynthia Charette. *Costume Designer:* Mary Jane Fort. *Director of Photography:* Mark Irwin. *Film Editor:* Patrick Lussier.

Music: J. Peter Robinson. *Executive Producers:* Robert Shaye, Wes Craven. *Produced by:* Sara Risher, Marianne Maddalena. *Written and directed by:* Wes Craven. *MPAA Rating:* R *Running time:* 112 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Horror movie star Heather Langenkamp (herself) grows disturbed when she learns that her young son, Dylan (Hughes), has been watching her *Nightmare on Elm Street* films. After the Los Angeles earthquake, however, things really start to grow weird, as if Freddy (Englund) himself is crossing over into reality, and using Dylan as one of his vessels. Heather seeks the advice of her friend, John Saxon (himself), and horror movie guru, Wes Craven (himself), who suggests that it is time for the actress to reprise her role of Nancy if she hopes to defeat an ancient demon that has taken the shape of Freddy Krueger.

COMMENTARY: *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* is part horror, part self-reflexive view into the milieu of movie-making, part savvy sequel (or re-imagination, perhaps) and part meditation on the cultural role of horror in modern America. Topping it all off, the film is a fun celebration of the first *Nightmare on Elm Street's* tenth anniversary.

New Nightmare involves a parent's personal journey. As the film opens, a mature, lovely Heather Langenkamp (playing herself) rigorously guards her son Dylan against the perceived danger of "scary movies," of horror films. She admits that she wouldn't even let Dylan see her own motion pictures, namely Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and that furthermore, she is uncertain about "doing horror" roles because of their impact on Dylan and other children his age.

Additionally, Heather does not understand why her boy, here representing all of America's children, is drawn to scary stories in the first place. Regarding "Hansel & Gretel," Heather declares, "it's so violent, I don't know why you like it."

As a result of his mother's repression of horror films and bedtime stories, however, young Dylan becomes partially possessed by the demons he has only half-glimpsed in these apparent fictions. Because he has not seen the entire picture, the whole film *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, he has not witnessed his mother defeat Freddy's evil. He is therefore left vulnerable to evil influences and emotions.



Heather Langenkamp and John Saxon survive an earthquake in *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*.

To illustrate this point, Craven's screenplay has Dylan awaken as if from a trance each time Heather abruptly turns off the television to censor his viewing. His need for security is shattered, and Dylan screams in horror. Importantly, he is not frightened by the images of terror unfolding on the screen, but because his mother has robbed him of important narrative closure, of the knowledge that, in the end, evil is defeated and the world is returned to normal.

As Heather reads "Hansel & Gretel" to Dylan for the umpteenth

time, he orders her to finish the story before he goes to sleep. "Say how they find their way home, it's important," he insists. Craven's implication is that children like to be scared and that stimulating horror stories/films serve as an outlet for this need. By seeing a scary story all the way to its conclusion, children learn that they too can beat scary influences in real life. Horror makes them aware that they will survive. The form is cathartic, in addition to being fun.

As the plot of *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* develops, Heather realizes that, as Craven eloquently puts it, an evil repressed can sometimes break through into "safe" reality. A woman who has refused to allow her child to see horror films is thrust unexpectedly into the position of defending them. "I'm convinced that those films can send an unstable child over the edge!" the well-meaning but parochial Dr. Heffner declares, but the horror Dylan faces is not imagined but real, ironically, because the Freddy films are no longer being made in the 1990s. When they were produced in the 1980s, the series served as a healthy outlet for teenage fears and anxieties. Since they stopped, evil has escaped into the real world and is doing massive damage because of this repression of the national catharsis.

Craven explores this theme of horror as an acceptable, even desirable outlet for fear by crafting an ongoing parallel between his *Elm Street* universe and the grim childhood story "Hansel & Gretel." Since "Hansel & Gretel" is deemed acceptable "bedtime reading" by most parents, a *Nightmare on Elm Street* is, by extension, also acceptable. And like the witch in the scary fairy tale, Freddy Krueger even tries to shove Dylan into an oven and in the film's denouement is cooked himself.

In stalking the young boy, Freddy declares, "I'm gonna eat you up!" and that he has some "gingerbread" for the boy, and these moments heighten the film's similarity to written folklore. By associating Freddy with "Hansel & Gretel," Craven states that horror movies can be shared with children because they are cathartic exercises and altogether healthy. The film's conclusion is the final reiteration of this leitmotif as Heather and Dylan sit together and read the *New Nightmare* script from start to finish, as the camera gently pulls away from the duo, both safe and sound. This reading provides closure and vanquishes Freddy forever to the world of imagination ... or at least until people stop making horror movies about this particular demon again.

Rich in theme and intellectual heft, *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* not only examines parental responsibility and the healthy aspects of the horror film, it is also profoundly self-referential in its commentary on the world of Hollywood filmmaking. The Freddy phenomenon is

roasted rather thoroughly by Craven. Freddy masks, costumes, gloves and affectionate fan signs appear on the talk show stage. Memorabilia from the Elm Street line, including reference books and action figures, show up. Paintings are seen in executive Bob Shaye's office, and fans like the creepy limo driver keep popping up everywhere and startling poor Heather in the tradition of Freddy himself.

Craven pointedly contrasts the fanaticism of some fans with the blasé attitude of those who make the films and profit from them. "That thing puts bread on our table," Chase reminds Heather when she petulantly objects to Freddy's new razor glove.

"The fans, god bless 'em, they're clamoring for more," Bob Shaye laughs, realizing he has a moneymaking bonanza in this particular franchise.

Indeed, the very fact that the tenth anniversary of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is a plot point in the film speaks to both fan devotion and executive greed. Amusingly, Craven bites the hand that feeds him here. At the same time that he makes another horror sequel for New Line and Shaye, he criticizes the company for literally running Freddy into the ground. Freddy has returned to the real world not just because of repression, but because his mythos has become overly familiar, too watered down by mainstream concerns.

Even as *New Nightmare* slams past sequels, it is loaded with references visual and verbal to past entries in the *Elm Street* film cycle. It is a movie about transformation and alternate reality bleeding into ours, so by the movie's climax Heather's world has turned into the world of the 1984 film. Stairs turn into mucky goo, earthquakes rattle California, and a beautiful blonde friend just like Tina gets dragged across a ceiling and is skinned by Monsieur Krueger. There is even the obligatory funeral sequence included here.

More significantly, Heather in *New Nightmare* cuts her arm in the same place that Nancy cut her arm in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Her hair goes gray too and she finds herself inadvertently repeating dialogue from the original film such as "whatever you do, don't fall asleep" and "screw your pass!"

The final transformation happens when actor John Saxon begins to call Heather "Nancy" and her chic L.A. home turns into Freddy's place at 1428 Elm. Reality has folded in upon itself and Heather has entered *The Twilight Zone*.

The first *Nightmare on Elm Street* is not the only series entry referenced here. Dr. Heffner, the disbelieving professional, echoes Dr. Elizabeth Sims in *Dream Warriors* (1986), who felt that Freddy wasn't real but rather a byproduct of "rampant" adolescent sexuality.

The roadside death of a male protagonist, Chase, is reminiscent of Alice's boyfriend Dan in *The Dream Child* (1989), down to the inclusion of a pick-up truck in the sequence.

Finally, Heather's comment to Dylan that people can only enter other people's dreams in the movies represents a sly put-down of the premise of *Dream Warriors*.

By re-interpreting these standards of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* film series, *New Nightmare* transcends the familiar mythos and actually becomes oddly unpredictable. Viewers believe they know all the twists, but as in *Scream* and *Scream 2*, all the twists are themselves twisted and given new meaning, and thus power, in their revision.

Wes Craven's New Nightmares contains many labyrinthine realities. For instance, the audience here is watching a horror movie concerning an actress planning to play herself in a horror movie. Fictional and real worlds overlap, and this is buttressed by the presence of Nick Corri, Robert Englund, Sara Risher, Craven and others, all playing themselves in the drama. Craven's warning that only storytellers can catch evil and trap it in a story connects the world of reality to film in a new way too. For all these reasons, *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* has often been referred to as an endeavor of Pirandellian dimensions.

Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936) was an Italian Nobel laureate and author of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1922). His primary thesis was that an individual contains several different personalities depending on how he appears to the people he relates to. The characters featured in Pirandello's literature find true reality only in their conscious mind, but ultimately realize that they are wavering and inexplicable creations, and therefore that there exists no "outer" concrete reality.

Wes Craven's New Nightmare is indeed reminiscent of Pirandello since in the final moments of the film, Heather Langenkamp realizes that she is not just an actress in a horror film, she is not merely a character on the silver screen, she is not just a mother fighting for her son, and she is not Nancy Thompson. She is simultaneously all and none of these things. As she prepares for her battle with Freddy, Heather discovers Wes Craven's script and reads aloud from it.

The more she read, the more she realized that what she had in her hands was nothing more or less than her life itself, that everything she had experienced and thought were bound within these pages.... [T]here was no movie, there was only her life.

Seen from this perspective, *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* is a blend of many worlds, conceptions and realities. It is a film within a film and it continues to multiply dimensions and thematic complexity the further one examines it. It is no wonder most critics responded with such enthusiasm to the film. It is also the spiritual predecessor, certainly, to the similarly-inclined *Scream* series.

Wes Craven's New Nightmare also works on a primal, childhood level. It plays on fears of the dark, monsters, "what's under the bed," anxieties about hospitals and more. Like *The Exorcist*, it concerns a child possessed by evil and a parent's attempt to win back the body, heart and mind of that lost soul. It also deftly blends humor with the fear of losing a child, that which is most valuable and innocent in the world. "Every kid knows who Freddy is. He's like Santa Claus or King Kong," Heather declares at one point, succinctly summarizing American pop culture in the 1990s.

Whether taken as a straight-up horror, a *Nightmare on Elm Street* sequel, social commentary, or self-reflexive, *The Player*– like meta movie *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* is an amazing product of the 1990s, and it only gets better on repeat viewings. Self-assured and extremely scary, *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* did something here that many thought was impossible after *Freddy's Dead*.

It breathed new life into an old monster. Wes Craven resuscitated Freddy Krueger, at least for one, last, delicious go-round.

Wolf * * *

Critical Reception

"A truly dreary misfire which on paper sounded like it had real potential. Jack Nicholson as a werewolf, and the lovely Michelle Pfeiffer as his unassuming prey? Count me in. Nevertheless, this one is a bore from start to finish, tonally all over the place and lacking anything compelling from its two otherwise impressive leads."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jack Nicholson (Will Randall); Michelle Pfeiffer (Laura Alden); James Spader (Stewart Swinton); Christopher Plummer

(Raymond Alden); Kate Nelligan (Charlotte Randall); Richard Jenkins (Detective Bridger); Eileen Atkins (Mary); David Hyde Pierce (Roy); Om Puri (Dr. Vijay Alezais); Ron Rifkin (Doctor); Prunella Scales (Maude); Brian Markinson (Detective Wade); Peter Gerety (George); Allison Janney (Party Guest); David Schwimmer (Cop)

CREW: Columbia Pictures Presents a Douglas Wick Production, a Mike Nichols Films. *Castings:* Juliet Taylor, Ellen Lewis. *Special Make-up:* Rick Baker. *Special Effects:* Sony Pictures Imageworks. *Animatronic Wolf Effects created by:* Tom Woodruff, Jr., Alec Gillis. *Music:* Ennio Morricone. *Associate Producer:* Jim Harrison. *Costume Designer:* Ann Roth. *Film Editor:* Sam O'Steen. *Production Designer:* Bo Welch. *Director of Photography:* Giuseppe Rotunno. *Executive Producers:* Neil Machlis, Robert Greenhut. *Written by:* Jim Harrison, Wesley Strick. *Produced by:* Douglas Wick. *Directed by:* Mike Nichols. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 125 minutes.

P.O.V.: "Instead of art we have pop culture, daytime TV, gay senior citizens, women who have been raped by their dentists confiding in *Oprah*. An exploration in depth of why women cut off their husband's penis...."—A cocktail party critique of the 1990s, from Mike Nichols' *Wolf*

SYNOPSIS: On his way home to Manhattan from Vermont, a publishing company's meek editor-in-chief, Will Randall (Nicholson), gets bitten by a wolf. When he returns to work, he finds his instincts sharpened, his senses heightened. These new "wolf" skills come in handy when his assistant and protégé Stewart Swinton (Spader) makes a play for his job with the company's new boss, the imperious Alden (Plummer). As Will progressively becomes a werewolf, he also falls in love with Alden's rebellious daughter, Laura (Pfeiffer).

COMMENTARY: During his impressive, multidecade career, director Mike Nichols has won an Oscar, Emmy, Tony and Grammy. He is beloved the world around for directing *The Graduate* (1967), which captured both the mood of the Generation Gap of the late 1960s and the sense of dawning malaise in the 1970s (hinting at the wake-up after the Hippie era).

Well, Nichols is brilliant, inventive, resourceful, and just a wee bit out of his depth in *Wolf* (1994), a scathing horror film that comments on the early 1990s corporate plague of "down-sizing."

As a commentary on "corporate re-structuring," *Wolf* is pretty amazing; it's a case of corporate wolves versus a literal werewolf. The script by Jim Harrison and Wesley Strick also follows the common horror structure of "the worm turns," meaning that a put-upon little

guy gets revenge against those who have wronged him. Here, Jack Nicholson's Manhattan editor, Will Randall, gets downsized out of his job by media tycoon and Rupert Murdoch wannabe, Raymond Alden (Christopher Plummer). Raymond is thus forced to choose between "no job or a job no one would want."

Randall is replaced as editor-in-chief by his obsequious underling, Stewart Swinton, played by an inordinately slimy James Spader, who is also having an affair with Randall's wife, Charlotte (Kate Nelligan). After being bitten by a wolf, however, something is passed along to Will: a new aggression and power. This worm "has turned and is now packing a fucking uzi."

Randall goes after his new corporate overlords in wicked ways. In the office bathroom, he actually urinates on Stewart's shoes, after eating asparagus. "I'm must marking my territory," he says innocently. This and other moments prove a scathing indictment of the cutthroat world of Big Business, and suggest that to succeed in this world you literally have to be a monster.

When focusing like a laser on Will's werewolf-awakening and what it means to him in the workplace, *Wolf* plays like a valuable book-end to *The Graduate*. Benjamin Braddock has grown up, cruised through life, and come to a point where the bigger fish of the world no longer see a need for him. He mans up (or wolf-mans up) and takes the fight back to the money-grubbers who see only the bottom line. Thus the story of Will Randal isn't just about corporate gamesmanship but about a mid-life crisis. Nichols saw the film in Kafka-esque terms:

Like *Metamorphosis*, this is a poetic expression of an inner state. It's a metaphor for the experience of becoming different from everyone else and leaving humanity behind, which is the kind of nightmare that happens to people in the middle of their lives. There's also the idea, on the other side of such a horror, there is something that isn't necessarily only dark, that endings aren't necessarily endings, and metamorphoses and changes aren't necessarily only bad.⁵⁰



Will Randall (Jack Nicholson), present-day werewolf in Mike Nichols' *Wolf* (1994).

Interestingly, *Wolf* also depicts an "exhausted" world around tired, wormy Will Randall. A cocktail party reveler notes that "art is dead," replaced by pop culture, and there's the general feeling that there are no more worlds to authentically conquer, hence America's focus on the horserace, on business gamesmanship. It's all just a game of who's in and who's out, who's up and who's down. The visuals strongly reflect this aspect of the storyline. Bo Welch's production design includes vistas "literally, physically falling apart—the streets, the buildings, the plumbing, the sewer system, the infrastructure."⁵¹ **She brings out the in *Wolf*.**

You can see this in the police station late in the film or at the hotel where Randall flees after learning of Charlotte's affair. This world of urban decay is then contrasted with the pastoral, ultra-wealthy world of the Aldens. In the end, Randall wants to check out of both worlds and does so. Becoming the "wolf," he leaves human civilization behind.

Nichols has crafted a smart, contemplative and wickedly funny film. Some of his symbolism is excellent. Just look at the shot of the Empire State Building right after Laura and Randall have had sex for the first time. But as I noted at the beginning of the review, Nichols is out of his element in terms of vetting the more overt horror genre aspects of *Wolf*.

For instance, he relies very heavily on slowmotion photography in fight scenes and chase scenes. And slow-motion, if not used properly, is the enemy of horror. It allows the audience to linger on things it shouldn't linger on. Like make-up, or the presence of stunt men. Naturally, slow-motion photography slows everything down, so it is also the enemy of momentum and pace, and a horror film desperately needs those qualities as well.



She brings out the in *Wolf*. She brings out the animal in him. Michelle Pfeiffer and Jack Nicholson in *Wolf*.

Being a great director and being a great horror director are not necessarily the same thing, and Nichols' greatest special effect in *Wolf* is Jack Nicholson himself, an actor whom many have always suspected has a bit of the wolf inside him. But Nicholson is also a diminutive guy pushing sixty years old, and the film involves, among other things, a physical transformation.

In close-ups, Nicholson pulls this off with a minimum of make-up; in the long, action shots, we're clearly looking at a stunt-man and the slowmotion photography makes this obvious and somewhat distancing.

James Spader also does well projecting a sense of decadent, deviant menace once he becomes a wolf man, but the final battles, in

prolonged slow-motion, seem more an invitation to laugh than be thrilled.

To be clear, horror does not need to be about action or violence. It can be an internal thing, about that metamorphosis Nichols discusses above. But when it comes down to the violence, it must be presented in a convincing manner or the wind goes out of the genre's sails. To a large extent, that happens in *Wolf*'s generally unimpressive last hour.

Wolf also has a problem with its dramatic structure, and one is less forgiving of Nichols here, regarding an area he is clearly an expert in. Most of the film involves Randall becoming the "wolf" on the job, staking out his territory and beating the archetypal Alden and his greasy underlings. Yet the final act makes it plain this story is not the important one. Randall goes "wolf," picks a new mate in Laura, and flees into the wilderness for a new life. If this were always the end game, then why bother with the human world of one-upmanship, back-stabbing, and jockeying for position? Perhaps a wolf would be smart enough not to play someone else's game and go right to the hunt.



Mike Nichols graduates to horror with *Wolf* (1994).

This is an important disconnect that renders part of *Wolf* diffuse and confusing, instead of searing and dramatic. A third-act rewrite is virtually demanded here: one which is set in the publishing world, with the victorious Randall unseating Alden and becoming corporate

king of the world. *Wolf*'s chosen ending, Randall and Laura in love and in the wild, has absolutely nothing to do thematically with anything that occurs in the film's first hour. It's a narrative detour that contributes nothing. A wolf doesn't run away from a fight, does it?

Many horror enthusiasts deeply dislike *Wolf*, and it's easy to understand why. There's a whiff of disrespect and contradiction in Nichol's belief that it is not a horror movie, and that he—using techniques proven not to work well—can still make a great one. He's got great stars, a great 1990s context of corporate greed, and a great look in an exhausted, fin-de-siècle Manhattan, but his story's last act is a mess. And the horror simply doesn't work.

Nichols needed a bit more of the beast in him to bring this movie off, and a little bit less of the admittedly-brilliant intellectual. A horror movie—especially one about werewolves—has to be about the heart as much as the head. *Wolf* is witty, *Wolf* is smart, *Wolf* is gorgeous.

But *Wolf* ain't scary.

1995

January 1:

The WTO is established.

February 20:

The Dow Jones Industrial Average closes over 4,000 for the first time.

February 26:

Rogue Trader Nick Leeson loses 1.4 billion dollars speculating on the Tokyo Stock Exchange, precipitating the collapse of his employer, the U.K.'s Baring Bank. He is arrested on March 2nd.

March 6:

On The Jenny Jones Show, a "Same Sex Crushes" episode results in murder when a heterosexual man kills his gay secret admirer.

March 20:

A deadly terrorist attack in the Tokyo subways sees Sarin gas killing twelve people and injuring over 5,000 commuters.

March 31:

Teenage Tejano musical sensation Selena is killed by the president of her own fan club.

April 19:

An act of domestic, right-wing terrorism occurs when Timothy McVeigh and his associates destroy the Alfred P. Murrah Federal

Building. One hundred and sixty-eight people are killed in the Oklahoma City Bombing.

May 27:

Actor and former Superman star Christopher Reeve is paralyzed from the neck down after an accident in an equestrian competition.

July 15:

Amazon.com, an online bookseller, is launched on the Internet and soon becomes a sensation.

September 19:

A left wing terrorist and serial killer known as The Unabomber (Ted Kaczynski) sees his anti-technology manifesto published in The New York Times. He is arrested in 1996, after having orchestrated sixteen bombings since the year 1978.

October 3:

In the criminal trial for the murder of his wife, former football star O.J. Simpson is acquitted of murder after a demonstration proves that the gloves found at the murder scene do not fit his hands. He will later be found guilty in a civil trial.

November 4:

Israeli prime minister and man of peace Yitzhak Rabin is assassinated at a peace conference.

November 21:

The first entirely CGI movie, Toy Story, is released theatrically to great acclaim and huge box office.

The Addiction * * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lili Taylor (Kathleen Conklin); Edie Falco (Jean); Annabella Sciorra (Casanova); Paul Calderon (Professor); Christopher Walken (Peina); Louis Katz (Doctor); Avron Coleman (Cellis); Fredro Starr (Black); Kathryn Erbe (Anthropology Student); Lisa Casillo (Mary); Nicholas Decegli (Cabby); Michael Imperioli (Missionary); Chuck Jeffries (Bartender); Ed Conna (Waiter); Nancy Ellen Anzalone (Dress victim); Heather Bracken (Nurse); Father Robert Castle (Narrator/Priest);

CREW: October Films and Polygram Filmed Entertainment presents an Abel Ferrara film. *Music:* Joe Delia. *Director of Photography:* Ken Kelsch. *Film Editor:* Mayin Lo. *Production Designer:* Charles Lagola. *Costume Designer:* Melinda Eshelmen. *Creative Consultants:* Anthony Redman, John McIntyre. *Produced by:* Denis Hann. *Executive Producers:* Russell Simmons, Preston Holmes. *Written by:* Nicholas St. John. *Directed by:* Abel Ferrara. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 82 minutes.

P.O.V: You think hell shuts down after a couple of years? You think what you've done isn't floating around somewhere in space? What makes you think you've been forgiven for lying to your mother as a child, huh? Or of having slept with married men in adultery or paying taxes that turn Central America into a mud puddle, huh?"— Kathleen Conklin (Lili Taylor) contemplates the everlasting nature of evil in *The Addiction*.

SYNOPSIS: In New York City, a philosophy doctorate candidate at NYU named Kathleen Conklin (Taylor) is accosted and bitten by a strange vampire on the street, Casanova (Sciorra). Before long, Kathleen develops not just a taste for blood, but a taste for evil, the subject itself, of her doctorate. For a time, Kathleen is guided by a vampiric mentor who has renounced evil, Peina (Walken). But soon, Kathleen strikes out on her own personal path.

COMMENTARY: *The Addiction* is a smart, rap music–punctuated horror film about mankind's addiction to evil. This is a vampire genre film, but it's much more than that, too. It is a deliberate re-construction of that historical form that suggests a deep, dark evil lurks inside all of mankind. Vampirism is one outlet for that evil, but hardly the only one or even the most significant one, for that matter.

"I never thought of it as a vampire movie," director Ferrara reported in the press material for *The Addiction*. "I related to the addiction that we all share—our own fascination with evil and violence. It seems to run through our blood. The vampire genre was a tool the writer used to express that."⁵²

Indeed, *The Addiction* is the journey of a smart but impressionable student, Kathleen, who, at the beginning of the film, cannot understand evil, or man's seemingly inescapable gravitational pull towards it. The film opens with shocking, upsetting images of the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam and a discussion of war as crime.

Later, Kathleen attends an exhibit of deeply disturbing photographs of German atrocities conducted against the Jews during the Holocaust. Again, these are images of human evil at its most visceral, and these documentary photographs and the black-and-white images from Vietnam hammer home the point that throughout his history, over and over again, man has succumbed to his appetite for evil, serving it up, too often, in quantities and flavors unimaginably horrific. This history *isn't* history (there is no history, says Kathleen), this is an external thing—Evil itself—and it is out there all the time. "Everything we are is eternally with us," she notes.



Kathleen (Lili Taylor) is a street vampire and graduate student in Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction* (1995).

In the film's first act, the intellectual Kathleen relies on psychology—on textbook philosophy—to evaluate the essence of evil and man's nature, quoting from Nietzsche, Heidegger, Descartes, Kierkegaard and Jung in a dedicated attempt to understand it. Ultimately, she becomes disillusioned by words. "Philosophy is propaganda," she concludes.

What she needs—and what she promptly gets—is a hands-on practicum in the art of evil. Unwittingly, Kathleen becomes the victim of a violent personal attack from a beautiful vampire and in the

process becomes "dependent" on blood. But more than that, she becomes addicted to hurting others, to committing evil acts.

Kathleen attacks and murders innocent people to acquire blood. And, in keeping with the film's metaphor of a student learning and going through a college program, even acquires a mentor with a different but valuable perspective: Christopher Walken as a gentler vampire who has forsaken violence and blood-sucking. He controls his addiction, he says, by diet, and by exercise (jogging, specifically). "The point is to blend in," he suggests.

Kathleen rejects the advice of this mentor, and by the end of the film—following her dissertation and graduation—stages her own masterwork: a personal variation of the My Lai Massacre, an orgy of blood and destruction. Kathleen now not only understands and embraces evil, she can orchestrate it herself on a large scale.

Lesson learned. A +

Uniquely, *The Addiction* suggests that Kathleen commits these evils not just because of the impulse to drink blood, but because of a subconscious determination to be closer to God. "Better to be guilty," the student notes, so that she can confess and seek redemption. In other words, it is better to have done a wrong thing, and learned from it, than to have lived an unexamined life. In the end, the vampire inside Kathleen dies from God's forgiveness, and that's where the movie ends. After all her evil, the human in Kathleen lives, forgiven.

Odd and disturbing, *The Addiction* is filmed in stark, crisp black-and-white, which has the overall effect of thoroughly de-romanticizing the vampire myth. Blood looks like viscous black oil, a resource to be used up. And the city streets are impersonal, crowded and anonymous, depicted to the pounding beat of urban music, much of it concerning drug use and drug addiction.



Casanova (Annabelle Sciorra) is the vampire who transforms Kathleen in *The Addiction*.

Yet despite the overwhelming presentation of man as evil and sinful, *The Addiction* also evidences a crazy, under-the-surface sense of humor. The film often settles down into quirky conversations about philosophy, and it's very funny to witness Christopher Walken discussing a good diet and exercise as the key to curbing vampiric appetites.

Or take, for example, Kathleen's cutting putdown of a fellow student: "You know, this obtuseness, it's disheartening, especially in a doctoral candidate. You ought to know better."

What this movie mocks then, is the academic, intellectual quest for knowledge and the pretentiousness of some students in pursuit of that knowledge. Academia is remote and self-indulgent, according to *The Addiction*, and it is actually *experience itself*— getting your hands

dirty

(with blood)—that gets you closer to the nature and meaning of life.

The Addiction offers shocking glimpses of real life evil, turns vampirism into the equivalent of a drug addiction (showing how one evil leads to another), and then plays lightly with its very story structure. It's an impressive, altogether distinctive alchemy. When the film cuts to images of real human-caused atrocities during Kathleen's blood fever, the connection between our species' violent tendencies and this particular "addiction" is visually enunciated in discomfoting terms.

And the film boasts valuable insights at times, often between the knowingly pretentious prognostications. For instance, *The Addiction* uses a good metaphor to suggest the fashion in which evil propagates itself: alcoholism. "We drink to escape the fact we're alcoholics. Existence is the search for relief from our habit, and our habit is the only relief we can find." So man keeps committing evil to elicit a (divine?) response to evil. It's a paradox or something akin to it: the fact that "self revelation" comes from the "annihilation of self."



Abel Ferrara (right) and Lili Taylor (left) discuss the philosophy of vampirism on the set of October Films' *The Addiction* (1995).

It's not easy to parse, it isn't simple-minded and it isn't straightforward, but *The Addiction* is a glorious and gory horror film, one of the best and most daring that the 1990s catalogue offers. In keeping with the path of the decade, it's very post-modern, very self-reflexive. *The Addiction* may not be to everyone's liking, but so what? You want an apology for ethical relativism or something?

***Candyman 2: Farewell to the Flesh* * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Tony Todd (Candyman); Kelly Rowan (Annie Tarrant); William O'Leary (Ethan Tarrant); Bill Nunn (the Reverend Ellis); Matt Clark (Thibideaux); David Granopoulos (Detective Ray Levesque); Fay Hauser (Pam Carver); Joshua Gibran (Mayweather); Michael Cuklin (Purcell); Timothy Carhart (Paul McKeever); Caroline Barclay (Caroline Sullivan).

CREW: Polygram filmed entertainment presents a Propaganda Films production of a Bill Condon film. *Casting:* Carol Lewis. *Music:* Philip Glass. *Film Editor:* Virginia Katz. *Production Design:* Barry Robison. *Director of Photography:* Tobias A. Schliessler. *Executive Producer:* Clive Barker. *Written by:* Rand Ravich, Mark Kruger. *Story by:* Clive Barker. *Produced by:* Sigurjun Sighvatsson, Gregg Fienberg. *Directed by:* Bill Condon. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On the eve of the Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans, Dr. Purcell (Cuklin), who has written a book on the urban legend of Candyman (Tony Todd), is murdered by the avenging African American spirit. Later, a school teacher, Annie Tarrant (Rowan), digs into a family tragedy and learns of her historical connection to Candyman, former artist Daniel Robitaille. When Candyman starts to hunt her, Tarrant seeks a weapon in her battle against the urban legend come to life.

COMMENTARY: The writing on the wall, the whisper in the classroom, the supernatural avenger and icon of modern folklore called Candyman, returns to the silver screen in a good if not great sequel from acclaimed director Bill Condon.

Many horror enthusiasts prefer *Farewell to the Flesh* to the original *Candyman*, citing its continuation of core elements from the original picture, including the racial subtext. However, *Candyman 2* ultimately generates less fear than its predecessor since its setting is not as dangerous, nor as vital and powerful as Cabrini-Green. Candyman's tricks this time, by dint of the fact that this is a sequel not an original, don't feel as fresh.



Sweets to the sweet: Candyman (Tony Todd) meets his descendent, Annie Tarrant (Kelly Rowan), in the sequel *Candyman 2: Farewell to the Flesh* (1995).



Final girl Annie Tarrant (Kelly Rowan) has a family secret bursting to get out in *Candyman 2: Farewell to the Flesh*.

Farewell to the Flesh concerns Candyman, the former slave and artist Daniel Robitaille, returning to his Southern roots, to the very plantation in New Orleans where his long, tragic journey began. The film focuses several times on murals that depict elements of Daniel's tale in the 1890s, and there's also an amazing, beautifully shot climactic flashback during which the audience gets to see what was only described in the original film: Candyman's hand sawed off by white oppressors. As Robitaille is swabbed with honey so that bees will sting him to death, a mob taunts him with the phrase "sweets to the sweets," a phrase which Candyman ultimately reclaims (like the n-word) for his own usage. to the sweets," a phrase which Candyman ultimately reclaims (like the n-word) for his own usage. to the sweets," a phrase which Candyman ultimately reclaims (like the n-word) for his own usage.

This time out, Candyman's quest involves his desire to see his Christian name, Daniel Robitaille, properly restored to its place in the Tennant history, in photo albums and storytelling. It's a brand of reparations, after a fashion. In the film's epilogue, Daniel's picture is finally included in the family photo album, where it belongs, and the inference is that, finally, the ghost can rest. Justice has been meted.

Unfortunately, like many of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* sequels, *Candyman 2: Farewell to the Flesh* pits Candyman against a relatively uncharismatic final girl or flavor of the week, one who happens to be his direct descendent. Playing Annie, Kelly Rowan lacks the sense of engagement and level of intensity that Virginia Madsen boasted in the original film, even if her character is more intimately connected to the Candyman legend than Helena Lyle.

Often the secret of making good franchise films is balancing a strong nemesis (like Jamie Lee Curtis, Heather Langenkamp, Ashley Laurence, or Virginia Madsen) against the powerful killer, so that audiences have someone to root for as well as someone to root against. Kelly Rowan is competent, but not on the level of a great challenge to Candyman.

Also like the later *Nightmare on Elm Street* sequels, Candyman's makers feel it necessary here to give the character an Achilles heel, in this case a mirror that houses his soul. Shatter the mirror and you shatter the Candyman, freeing his soul and sending him to the grave. Remember how with Freddy, you had to turn your back on him and deprive him of his energy? Then, bury his bones in consecrated ground? Then close the nightmare gate? Then summon Sister Amanda? Then bring him into the real world and stab him and blow him up with dynamite?



Director Bill Condon directs a historical flashback on the set of Gramercy's *Candyman 2: Farewell to the Flesh* (1995).

Sure you do: each *Nightmare* movie suggested a way to kill Freddy, and then the next movie in the franchise totally ignored that method of destruction. *Candyman 2* creates the mirror as the key to Candyman's annihilation, but the next movie, *Candyman 3* ignores it, suggesting that to destroy Candyman you need to destroy his paintings instead.

Funny how all these sequels start to look alike after a while...

On the other hand, *Candyman 2* gets significant mileage from the Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans, with one scene finding Annie wandering through a bacchanalia on the street, wandering amidst fucking, vomiting and general debauchery. It portrays rather explicitly what Daniel's history only suggests, of breaking of taboos and cultural restrictions, of letting go, of indulging in sin to erase the memory of former sin.

Annie's mother, for instance, played with boozy arrogance by the great Veronica Cartwright, is an alcoholic and is told by Annie that "you can't wish" Candyman "away with a bottle." This is a reflection of the South itself and its obsessive need to erase the sin of slavery from the history books, to argue instead for "northern aggression," "states rights" and other issues all the while ignoring the elephant in the room named slavery. This is still happening in 2011.

But you can't wish the Candyman away by erasing him. You've got to put his picture in the photo album where it belongs and finally accept what was. That's a pretty strong message for a good, solid horror sequel, but even so, you can see creative hardening of the arteries beginning to set in here.

By the third *Candyman* film it was a terminal case.

Carnosaur 2 * 1/2

Cast and Crew

CAST: John Savage (Jack Reed); Cliff De Young (Major Tom McQuade); Rick Dean ("Monk" Brody); Ryan Thomas Johnson (Jesse Turner); Arabella Holzbog (Sarah Rawlins); Miguel A. Nunez, Jr. (Ed Moses); Neith Hunter (Joanna Galloway); Guy Boyd (Joe Walker); Michael James McDonald (Evac Team Pilot); Christopher Vargas (Hal Mosley); Don Stroud (Ben Kahane); Jason Adelnar (Davey Lewis); Ed

O'Brien (William G. Clark).

CREW: Roger Corman presents *Carnosaur 2*. *Casting:* Jan Glaser. *Special Creature and Visual Effects:* John Buechler and Magical Media Industries. *Special Miniature Effects:* Anthony Doublin. *Associate Producer:* Mike Upton. *Music:* Ed Tomney. *Production Designer:* Robert De Vico. *Director of Photography:* John Aronson. *Film Editor:* Roderick Davis. *Executive Producer:* Roger Corman. *Written by:* Michael Palmer. *Produced by:* Mike Elliott. *Directed by:* Louis Morneau. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 80 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two months after the Eunice Corp. dinosaur virus outbreak, an elite Department of Defense team is sent to Yucca Mountain Communications Installation to investigate a problem. In short order, the team finds rampaging dinosaurs and rescues a young survivor of a massacre, Jesse (Johnson). Before the team can leave, a dinosaur takes down their chopper in flight, stranding the humans in a facility overrun by hungry reptiles.

COMMENTARY: Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. That's *Carnosaur 2*'s underlying and likely unintentional message.

Though on the surface this sequel to 1993's *Carnosaur* concerns genetically-engineered dinosaurs running amok (the bailiwick of the *Jurassic Park* film franchise), this movie actually boasts another, older model, a blueprint that it follows play-by-play. That template is James Cameron's 1986 thriller, *Aliens*.

The shadow of *Aliens* virtually dominates *Carnosaur 2* in terms of its over-arching narrative. Here, an elite interracial and mixed-sex team of soldiers (think Colonial Marines) investigates an infested facility (think the Terraforming Station on LV-426), finds a child on site (think Newt), and ultimately must destroy the installation because of rampaging monsters (Xenomorphs).

But it's sort of amazing, too, how *Carnosaur 2* apes *Aliens* even in small, specific details. Let me walk you through just a few of the similarities.

In *Aliens*, a pilot named Ferro (Colette Hiller) is aboard an escape vehicle, in the cockpit, when attacked in flight by an alien. The vehicle crashes, stranding the other Marines (and Ripley) at the alien-infested facility.

In *Carnosaur 2*, a pilot is also attacked in his vehicle (by a dinosaur), and he crashes the helicopter, stranding the team in the

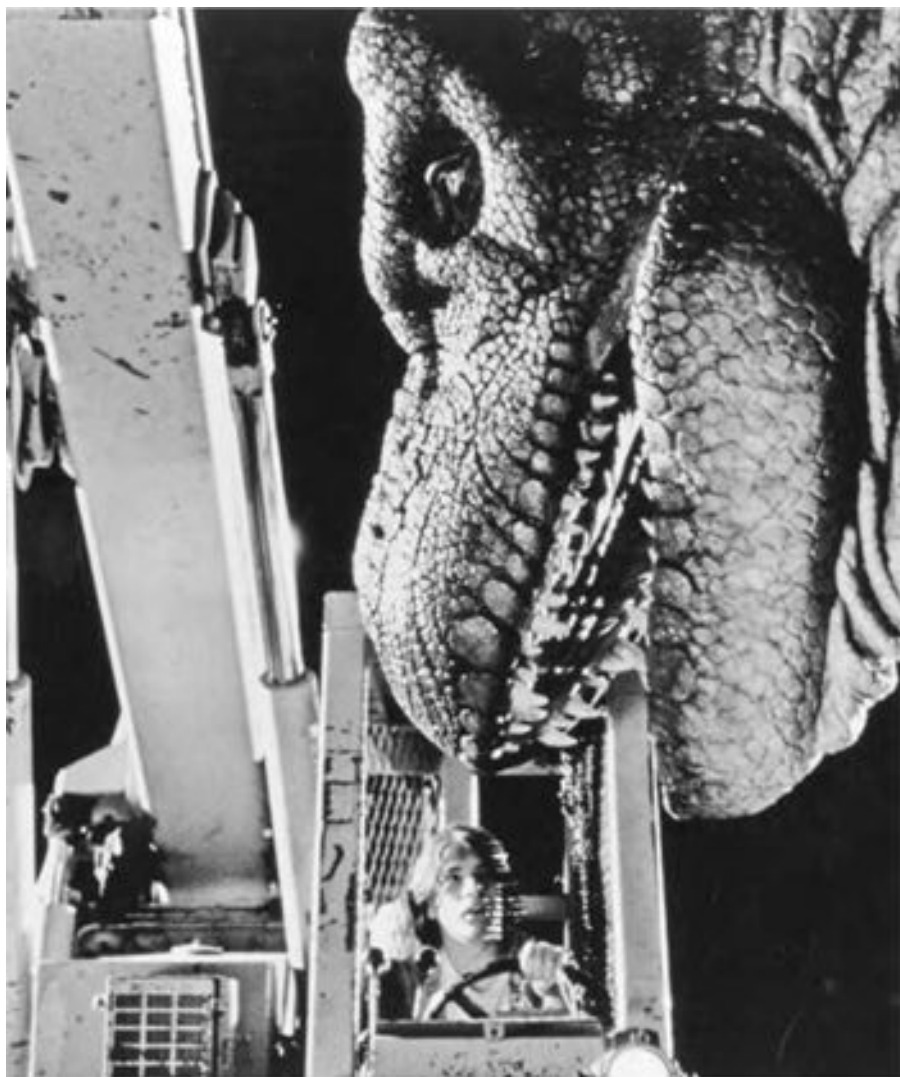
dinosaur-infested facility.

In *Aliens*, there's a heated debate about how to handle the alien infestation on LV-426's terraforming station. Ripley suggests nukes as "the only way to be sure" the danger is actually eliminated.

This argument is repeated in *Carnosaur 2* with John Savage's character discussing how to blow up the plants, using the de-commissioned Cold War nukes on site.



Jack Reed (John Savage, left) and Jesse (Ryan Thomas Johnson) battle dinosaurs in *Carnosaur 2*.



A T-Rex attacks a bulldozer in *Carnosaur 2* (1994).

In *Aliens*, Vasquez, Hicks, Ripley and Newt attempt to escape from invading aliens by escaping through a vent shaft. Near the climax of *Carnosaur 2*, the survivors also take sanctuary in a vent shaft.

In *Aliens*, the final battle for species dominance is fought outside the contaminated facility (aboard the *Sulaco*) and the hero Ripley dons a construction vehicle of sorts, a "loader" (of the futurist variety), to defeat the last alien, the Queen.

In *Carnosaur 2*, the final battle occurs outside the contaminated facility, with the hero battling the last dinosaur— a T-Rex—inside a

construction vehicle ... a fork-lift. Which, in fairness, may be a nod to 1960's *Dinosaurus* in addition to *Aliens*.

On and on this list goes. Both *Aliens* and *Carnosaur 2* feature a facility dotted with "Sub Levels." And remember how Hudson (Bill Paxton) wondered how the aliens could cut the power in the facility? "They're animals, man!" he exclaimed.

Here, one of the characters reiterates that refrain by saying (of the dinosaurs): "what are you talking about man, they're lizards?" Likewise, Cliff De Young tiresomely plays "McQuade," a Gorman-esque superior without much by way of guts, who gives orders that his subordinates would rather ignore than obey.

Both movies also end with the nuking of the contaminated installation.

Despite all the excessive imitation of *Aliens*, *Carnosaur 2* is still a step up from the original *Carnosaur*. For one thing, there's an effective and unexpected gore sequence in which the sexy marine gets mauled by a dinosaur. Before this scene, she had "final girl" written all over her, so her death is authentically surprising. In addition to this shock, the sets in the film are decent, and by and large the performances are fine.

And there is even the priceless scene in which a dinosaur literally bitch slaps Miguel Nunez, which, frankly, is something I've waited a long time to see in a movie, especially after Nunez's performances in *Friday the 13th: A New Beginning* (1985) and *Leprechaun 4: In Space* (1997).

Still, this movie should have been called *Alienosaurus*.

***Castle Freak* * * * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jeffrey Combs (John Reilly); Barbara Crampton (Susan Reilly); Jonathan Fuller (Giorgio); Massimo Sarchielli (Gianetti); Elizabeth Kaza (Agnesse); Luca Zingaretti (Forte); Rafaella Offidan (Sylvana); Helen Stirling (Duchess D'Orsino); Alessandro Sebastian Satta (J.J.); Tunny Piras (Grimaldi); Marco Stefanelli (Benedetti); Rolando Cortegan (Tonio); Jessica Dollarhide (Rebecca Reilly).

CREW: Full Moon Entertainment presents a Stuart Gordon film.

Casting: Robert MacDonald, Perry Bullington. Art Director: Franco Vanorio. Special Make-up Effects: Optic Nerve. Costume Designer: Tziana Mancini. Film Editor: Bert Glatstein. Music: Richard Band. Director of Photography: Mario Vulpiani. Story: Stuart Gordon, Dennis Paoli. Written by: Dennis Paoli. Executive Producers: Albert and Charles Band. Produced by: Maurizio Maggi. Directed by: Stuart Gordon. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The Reilly family inherits a castle in Italy, the castle once belonging to the Duchess D'Orsino (Stirling). While the family inventories the castle, patriarch John (Combs) attempts to reconcile with his estranged wife, Susan (Crampton), who has never forgiven him for the car accident that killed their son J.J. (Satta) and rendered their teenage daughter, Rebecca (Dollarhide), blind. At the same time, the Duchess's savage, animalistic son escapes from shackles in a castle dungeon and goes on a murderous spree, killing a prostitute that John brings back to the wine cellar during a drunken stupor. The police arrest John for her murder, leaving the monster free to pursue his real quarry, Rebecca.

COMMENTARY: There's a monster dwelling in the castle in Stuart Gordon's *Castle Freak*.

And also a savage, barely-human freak... The monster might best be described as guilt. And the freak is the tortured, mad, abandoned son of the former castle owner, who dies of a heart attack after whipping her son to within an inch of his life.

The creature has never known affection or humanity, and the man carrying the guilt, John Reilly, has lost all the affection he once had in his life over a tragic drunk-driving accident, one that has robbed him of a beloved son and estranged him from his wife.

Only one of these personalities can be redeemed, and in large part, that's what *Castle Freak* truly involves, the redemption of John Reilly, played by Jeffrey Combs in haunted, desperate fashion.

He's a fascinating character too, a very 1990s kind of guy who keeps making mistakes, but who also keeps trying to do right. On one occasion, he neglects his daughter, Rebecca, while inventorying his new castle and she injures and bloodies a knee. His wife Susan has a conniption fit, blaming John again for the accident that took away their child.

When John attempts to get affection from Susan, she openly

rejects him. This sends him into a fit of despair so he resumes his alcoholic ways, and then has groping, quick sex with a prostitute in the basement of his new home. His desire to be close, to be forgiven, rejected, John just keeps on making mistakes. Worse, he hears moaning "like a child crying," in the castle at night. A manifestation of his guilt? Or something more terrifying?

Castle Freak is about John Reilly's quest for forgiveness from his family, and the big mistakes he makes on the way. It isn't hard to look at Reilly and detect that his struggle is a lot like President Clinton's. True, Clinton was never an alcoholic, never hired a prostitute and never dealt with the death of a child. But as he acknowledged in a famous 1992 *60 Minutes* interview, he had caused pain in his marriage. By the end of the decade, Clinton—like Reilly—was also seeking redemption from his wife and the nation that twice elected him.

Castle Freak is also a gory, go-for-broke, mad horror movie with a deformed, bloody, barelyhuman creature roaming a Gothic Italian castle. The movie purposefully makes it unclear whether the beast, Giorgio, is desperate for sex or merely affection and human contact, and one wonders if this creature actually reflects some aspect of John Reilly.

Perhaps Giorgio is meant to represent John's id, his reptile brain. The thing lurches about madly and bloodily to get emotional and human needs met after years of seeing them denied by the primary figure in his life, his mother. The visual depiction of Giorgio is certainly all grotesque id. He's a naked, monstrous, repellent thing, and occasionally the audience can even detect the monster's stunted, tiny genitals. In the scene with the prostitute, Giorgio bites off one of the prostitute's nipples, unable to control his urges. He has watched John have sex with her, and he imitates John's drunken, passionate moves, only taking them to a new, savage level.

Stuart Gordon is a class act, and he delivers a good, thoughtful and extremely violent, visceral movie in *Castle Freak*. Early on, he stages a vertigo-inducing shot from the castle-ramparts, gazing down at the arrival of John and his family. This shot is not only effective because the highangle expresses an element of doom, but because the location and manner of shot foreshadows the film's climax, in which John and Giorgio—two sides of the same coin; two aspects of one personality—become shackled together and plummet from this position to their mutual doom.

It's no accident that one of Giorgio's first acts upon finding his freedom is to shatter a mirror. He can't face his own physical ugliness,

just as John can't face the ugliness and loneliness inside himself. The mirror reflects too much unpleasantness for both characters, and *Castle Freak* is really a comparison between these "men." One is still human and "conscious" enough to contemplate sacrifice; the other is further down the path, denied human care and affection so long that the only thing left is violent, brutal desperation. In forging this artistic comparison between two troubled individuals, Stuart Gordon delivers a fine psychological study in *Castle Freak*.

And he certainly gets his freak on too.

***Children of the Corn III: Urban Harvest* * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Daniel Cerny (Eli); Ron Melendez (Joshua); Michael Ensign (Father Frank); Jon Clair (Malcolm); Mari Morrow (Maria); Duke Stroud (Earl); Rance Howard (Employer); Brian Peck (Jake); Nancy Lee Grahn (Alice); Jim Metzler (William Porter); Gavin Funches (T. Loc); Gina St. John (Diane); Yvette Freeman (Samantha); Rif Hutton (Arnold); Johnny Legend (Derelict);

Nicholas Brendon (Basketball Player); Charlize Theron (Young Woman).

CREW: Park Avenue Productions, Trans Atlantic Entertainment.
CASTING: Donald Paul Pemrick. *PRODUCTION DESIGNER:* Blair A. Martin.
CREATURE MAKEUP EFFECTS: Screaming Mad George. *SOUND DESIGN:* Jonathan Miller. *MUSIC:* Daniel Licht. *FILM EDITOR:* Chris Peppe. *DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:* Gerry Lively. *EXECUTIVE PRODUCER:* Anthony L.V. Hickox. *WRITTEN BY:* Dode B. Levonson. *BASED ON THE SHORT STORY BY:* Stephen King. *PRODUCED BY:* Gary De Pew, Brad Southwick. *DIRECTED BY:* James Hickox. *MPAA RATING:* R. *RUNNING TIME:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two boys from rural Gatlin, Joshua (Melendez) and creepy Eli (Cerny), move to Chicago where they live with the Porters, their new adoptive parents. Eli plants corn in the old abandoned factory next to the Porter House and resumes his devilish worship of the evil deity, He Who Walks behind the Rows. As a harvest moon nears, Eli bends the local school children to his evil will, even as Mr. Porter (Metzler) draws up plans to distribute Eli's pest-resistant and presumably evil corn worldwide.

COMMENTARY: Two young survivors of the Gatlin massacre attempt to blend in with a normal middle class family in this, the second sequel to 1984's *Children of the Corn*. One child, Eli, clings to his fundamentalist, religious, and in this case, wholly evil beliefs, while the other child, Joshua, is assimilated into mainstream American culture, playing basketball and dating chicks.

Meanwhile, the boys' yuppified adopted father, Mr. Porter (Metzler), plans to exploit the Gatlin tragedy and Eli, too, by making a financial killing shipping corn around the world. Unfortunately for the world, it is evil corn ... destined to turn unlucky children into cultists.

Very quickly upon entrance into mainstream society, Eli begins to preach to his fellow teens and gains adherents to his anti-pesticide, antipollution, pro-He Who Walks behind the Rows message. During one of his sermons, a lovely young woman is mesmerized by his words, and eagle-eyed fans will recognize her as actress Charlize Theron, who just a few years after her uncredited appearance here became an A-list star.

Children of the Corn III: Urban Harvest is no great shakes, however, despite the presence of a future Oscar-winner. The film's sense of terror, such as it is, rests on sepia-tone visions of the Gatlin massacre, visions forced upon an unlucky priest and high school principal.

Another highlight is the murder of Mrs. Porter, which proves particularly gory and over-the-top. The franchise "monster" also shows up for a last minute violent cameo as a giant, multilimbed terror, and Josh has to pull his girlfriend, Maria, out of its goopy gullet.

The film ends with a sting-in-the-tale/tail that promises yet another unnecessary sequel. Here, Eli's evil-infected crop arrives in Germany. "This is just the beginning. Soon we'll be shipping all over the world."

True to this prophecy, *Children of the Corn IV* would soon continue the DTV franchise, although, ironically, it would drop the contaminated corn angle and focus on other matters.

***Copycat* * * ***

"One of the lesser byproducts of the *Silence of the Lambs* phenomenon, with Sigourney Weaver turning in a typically strong lead performance. Nevertheless, ersatz crooner Harry Connick, Jr., lacks any teeth as the film's Hannibal Lecter wannabe."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Sigourney Weaver (Helen Hudson); Holly Hunter (Detective M.J. Monahan); Dermot Mulroney (Detective Ruben Goetz); William Mc-Namara (Peter Foley); Harry Connick, Jr. (Daryll Lee Cullum); J.E. Freeman (Lt. Quinn); Will Patton (Nicoletti); John Rothman (Andy); Shannon

O'Hurley (Susan Schiffer); Bob Greene (Pachulski); Tony Haney (Kerby); Danny Kovacs (Kustas)

CREW: Regency Enterprises Presents an Aaron Milchan production, a John Amiel film. *Casting:* Billy Hopkins, Suzanne Smith, Kerry Barder. *Costume Designer:* Claudia Brown. *Music:* Christopher Young. *Film Editors:* Alan Heim, Jim Clark. *Production Designer:* Jim Clay. *Director of Photography:* Laszlo Kovacs. *Executive Producers:* Michael Nathanson, John Fiedler. *Produced by:* Arnon Milchan, Mark Tarlov. *Written by:* Ann Biderman, David Madsen. *Directed by:* John Amiel. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 125 minutes.



Stalked by a serial killer: Helen Hudson (Sigourney Weaver) probes the darkness in *Copycat* (1995).

SYNOPSIS: A serial killer is hunting in San Francisco, and the lead police detective, M.J. Monahan (Hunter), seeks the help of agoraphobic and recluse serial killer expert, Dr. Helen Hudson (Weaver), to help capture him. As Hudson soon learns, the killer is purposefully recreating the crimes of the Hillside Strangler, the Boston Strangler, the Son of Sam, and even the very killer who traumatized Hudson, Daryll Lee Cullum (Connick Jr.).



From left to right: Helen Hudson (Sigourney Weaver), Detective Goetz (Dermot Mulroney) and Det. Monahan (Holly Hunter) in *Copycat*.

COMMENTARY: Every now and then a big Hollywood blockbuster, a product essentially, gets the job done in perfectly proficient fashion. Not precisely in a deep, scare-youto-your-core way (like *Silence of the Lambs* or *Se7en*) but rather in a generic, time-haspassed, diverting way.

The serial killer thriller *Copycat* is one such movie. The story concerns a madman who is imitating all the great serial crimes of history, which makes the film, essentially, a guided tour through the

crimes of the Boston Strangler, the Son of Sam, the Hillside Strangler, even Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy. This nefarious serial killer is opposed by the great Sigourney Weaver, playing an agoraphobic shutin, so her character has a big trauma to overcome by movie's end. Holly Hunter plays the serial killer paradigm's equivalent of the final girl, a tough-talking cop defined in the script as "one tough broad."

Copycat even boasts an elegant book-end structure, since the film opens and closes with the attempted murder of Weaver's character in a public bathroom. The film also has some interesting commentary on the then-new information venue of the Internet, which the writers describe as an "open window" for predators like Daryll Cullum, or Peter Kurtan.

The problem with *Copycat* is that, unlike the high points of the serial killer formula, again namely *Se7en* (1995) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), this movie has no interest in really exploring the madness of its villains, or of really, truly frightening the audience with despicable, perverse acts.

Copycat has no edge. Much like *Kiss the Girls* (1997), it's a serial killer movie for a mass audience, and that means it doesn't push the limits or boundaries of what's permissible.

But *Copycat* is markedly better than *Kiss the Girls* and many other serial killer movies of the 1990s simply because of the two good lead performances from Weaver and Hunter. Despite a script that is dependent largely on clichés of the format, these actresses manage to come across as real people. Weaver's fear after the initial attempt on her life is palpable. And, as usual, Weaver isn't afraid to show the caustic, aggressive side of her characters. Helen Hudson is a genius and a ball buster, and somehow, that makes her seem more authentic and true-to-life.

In the Jodie Foster role, Holly Hunter is good too, grappling with her own demons and, in the end, saving the day. It's a less-challenging part, but Hunter is always appealing.

Copycat wouldn't work as well if we didn't come to like and care about these female characters. At one point, the movie provides a montage of M.J. and Helen viewing crime scene photos (a full-time occupation in serial killer movies of the 1990s), and—through cross-cutting—these heroic women are visually connected. They are both "solving" a crime from their own unique perspective, whether it is law enforcement experience or psychological study.

This idea makes for an interesting sense of balance in the film. It's not just the book-end opening and closing attacks that mirror one another; it's the two male serial killers (Cullum and Kurtan) against

two female investigators and hunters. In the end, this time, the women come out on top.

Unchallenging but nonetheless eminently watchable, *Copycat* gets the job done proficiently. Still, you know while you're watching it that it's just one of "those" movies. No great shakes, nothing to trouble your slumber but fine enough to pass two-hours with on a rainy day.

Embrace of the Vampire * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Alyssa Milano (Charlotte); Martin Kemp (Vampire); Harrison Pruett (Chris); Jordan Ladd (Eliza); Rachel True (Nicole); Charlotte Lewis (Sarah); Jennifer Tilly (Marika); Rebecca Ferratti (Princess); Glori Gold, Shawnee Ryan, Sabrina Allen (Nymphs); Robbin Julien (Rob); David Portlock (Peter); Gregg Vance (Jonathan); John Riedlinger (Milo); Ladd Vance (Mark); M. Philip Scibeli (Professor).

CREW: The Ministry of Film and General Media Present an Anne Goursoud film. *Casting:* Shana Landsburg. *Line Producer:* Todd King. *Production Designer:* Peter Stolz. *Music:* Joseph Williams. *Film Editor:* Terilyn A. Shropshire. *Director of Photography:* Suki Medenceric. *Written by:* Halle Eaton, Nicole Coady, Rick Bitzelberger. *Executive Producer:* Ladd Vance, Matt Ferro. *Produced by:* Marilyn Vance, Alan Mrurka. *Directed by:* Anne Goursoud. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

P.O.V.: "I made *Vampire's Embrace* for young woman. I'm saying 'be conscious. Be aware of the world around you. Don't let anybody make your decisions for you.'"⁵³—Director Anne Goursoud describes the meaning behind *Embrace of the Vampire*.

SYNOPSIS: An age-old vampire (Kemp) has only three days to woo a virginal college freshman, Charlotte (Milano)—actually the reincarnated soul of his lost princess. If he fails to win her heart before her eighteenth birthday, the vampire dies. If he succeeds, his prize is eternal life. The catch: the vampire's quarry must desire him before he drains her blood. Meanwhile, Charlotte's boyfriend, Chris

(Pruett), is pressuring her for sex, and Charlotte has developed an eye for a sexy female photographer (Lewis).

COMMENTARY: To put this bluntly, a generation of red-blooded American boys grew up desiring to see *Who's the Boss* star Alyssa Milano naked.

If nothing else, the erotic horror *Embrace of the Vampire* fulfills that desire. Milano strips frequently here, playing an almost-eighteen-yearold virgin on the precipice of an active sex-life. Actually, the movie is a win for the actress too, a victorious attempt for her to shed her "good girl" image and be seen as an adult movie star.



Charlotte (Alyssa Milano, left), with the help of photographer Sarah (Charlotte Lewis), becomes aware of her sexuality—and vampires too, in the erotic horror film *Embrace of the Vampire* (1995). and vampires (1995).

Well then, mission accomplished.

As seems to be the case with many erotic horror movies, *Embrace of the Vampire* is more successful with the conventions of the former

than of the latter. Here, every plot point leads Alyssa's Charlotte, an Alice in Wonderland, down the deeper rabbit hole of burgeoning, sweaty sexuality. For instance, Charlotte gets involved in a photo shoot, and the photographer happens to be a hot lesbian. Naturally, the sequence gets down to fondling and more.

Then, at the hour point, Charlotte obligingly dreams of a three-way with her boyfriend and the aforementioned lesbian.

Finally, in the last act, Jennifer Tilly shows up out-of-the blue as a sexy barfly trying to pick up Charlotte's boyfriend.

It's as though someone's going through a check-list or something. Lesbians? *Check*. Group sex? *Check*. And so on.

Still, this material is not lacking visual or fantasy appeal. Milano projects a fetching sense of innocence, charm and vulnerability as Charlotte. Meanwhile, director Anne Goursoud spends nearly as much time filming the scenic backdrop—which consists largely of Gothic university architecture—as she does the female pulchritude. In other words, the film feels legitimately Gothic and is well-filmed. You don't need to feel too guilty watching it.

What doesn't make so much conventional sense, alas, is the film's plot. A vampire has been given three days (or until Charlotte turns eighteen) to make the virgin his. But the catch is that Charlotte must desire this metrosexual, Euro-trashy vampire and give herself to him willingly.

So, to win her heart, does the vampire get to know Charlotte as a person? As a friend? Does he take her out on romantic adventures?

No, instead, the vampire—a poor man's Nic Cage—keeps telling her "I'm your destiny," over and over. Apparently, he's never actually encountered this thing called "a woman" before, because this authoritarian approach, in my experience, tends to have the opposite of the desired impact.

But the vampire isn't smart enough to realize that. He just keeps showing up in Charlotte's dreams and nightmares, demanding that she wants him.

What is this, the 1950s?

The brainwashing never gets close to working. Charlotte's body may desire the vampire, but her heart never even enters the game. Accordingly, the vampire fades out at picture's end and grownup Charlotte settles down to a nice life of monogamous, missionary-position-style sex with her perfectly acceptable human boyfriend.

Embrace of the Vampire is very nice to look at, and there are

worse ways to spend ninety-five minutes. But like the romantic, cheesy vampire of the title, the film practically demands that you come along and get swept into the fairy tale passion.

You may find that you're not in the mood.

***The Fear** * **

Cast and Crew

CAST: Eddie Bowz (Richard); Leland Hayward (Vance); Darin Heams (Troy); Anna Karin (Tanya); Monique Mannen (Mindy); Heather Medway (Ashley); Antonio Todd (Gerald); Erick Weiss (Morty); Vince Edwards (Peter); Wes Craven (Dr. Arnold); Ann Turkel (Leslie); Hunter Bedrusian (Richard); Rebecca Baldwin (Rose); Stacy Edwards (Becky).

CREW: Devin Entertainment Presents a Greg H. Sims Production, a Vincent Robert Film. *Casting:* Linda Berger. *Executive Producer:* Greg H. Sims. *Director of Photography:* Bernd Heintz. *Production Designer:* Brian McCabe. *Costume Designer:* Reve Richards. *Morty Effects Designed by:* MMI. *Film Editor:* Nancy Forner. *Produced by:* Richard Brandes. *Written by:* Ron Ford. *Directed by:* Vincent Robert. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: For his graduate thesis, psychology student Richard (Bowz) takes a group of friends and family up to a remote mountain cabin for an exploration of personal fear. Once there, Richie finds Morty (Weiss), an old, life-size doll—built by Indians—still at the house and decides to use him as part of the study. But Morty seems to be alive, and mobile, and before long, those involved in the experiment have more to fear than fear itself.

COMMENTARY: *The Fear* is a psychology-heavy variation on the *Evil Dead* story. Here, a diverse group of young-adult friends head out to a cabin in the woods, only to encounter terror and death.

In *The Fear*, however, the terror is not Deadite in nature, but rather Freudian. The very thing that each character fears (religion, heights, commitment, self, etc.) becomes the tool by which that

character is ultimately dispatched. One character, Richard (Bowz) sees through his fear and uncovers a dark secret from his past, untangling his nightmare imagery in the process and un-jumbling the dream word "diametric" into "matricide."

At the heart of the film is a question about the nature of fear in human beings. Does it hold us back? Or does fear protect us? *The Fear* seems to think the latter, and in terms of technique it is pretty good itself at generating an aura of fear. In particular, the film offers several images that are certain to provide audiences nightmare fodder after a viewing.

The first of these terrifying images is Morty, the old Indian doll that stood at the front of a general store in the days of Richard's grandfather. Carved from wood in the 1920s according to the film, this doll looks fully human, but most of the time is seen absolutely still. It just sits there, sort of creepily watching from a corner for many sequences. During a long scene in which all the youngsters prattle on about their individual fears, Morty is the quiescent elephant in the room, ready to burst to life at any moment. The fear of the slumbering Morty is the fear of a juggernaut coming to life.

Director Vincent Robert is clever about the way he deploys this villain—never showing Morty in full motion till near film's end, thus preserving the character's mystery and terror. When audiences finally do see the doll burst to life, it's worth the wait, and traumatic. Morty is *The Fear's* MVP.

The second scary element of *The Fear* is actually a setting: a small, Christmas-themed amusement park tucked away in the woods. Among the attractions are "Santa's Chapel" and a "Magic Train Ride." Also on hand are effigies of storybook characters Jack & Jill and the Gingerbread Man. And this Christmas village, replete with carousel, is populated by none other than Black Peter, a malevolent variation on the Santa character, and a terrifying one at that.

There's something amazingly creepy about these stylized, diminutive rides and the troll-like Black Peter. This so-called "place of fun" is actually nothing short of terrifying, a reflection of the fact that children's' tales are often filled with horror and nightmarish imagery. In *The Fear*, a nighttime excursion to the Christmas village is instead an exploration of real fear. Perhaps it's the idea of something joyful (a holiday) transformed into something dark, something designed for children being instead a fulcrum of creeping terror.

Without Morty and the scene set at the Christmas village, *The Fear* wouldn't succeed half as much as it does. The performances are not particularly good and the script is muddled and confusing at

times, working overtime to seem profound. Wes Craven appears early in the film, in an extended cameo, as a psychologist/professor named Dr. Arnold, and he discusses, at length, "the search for wholeness" as "the holy grail of psychology." He's compelling to listen to, enough so that you might wish you were watching a protracted interview with the filmmaker instead of this movie.

But whenever Morty is on screen, *The Fear* just doesn't talk the psychological talk; it walks the horror walk. That Morty doll is scary as hell even if, in the end, he's not a ghoul at all ... just a totem trying to help his former "best friend," Richard, get over his childhood fears.

In the great horror tradition, there's even a little pathos at the end of this tale. Now shorn of his childhood fear, a grateful Richard tells Morty to leave, and the doll reluctantly does so. A bit sadly, Morty turns away and sinks down into the lake, his job complete.

It's just too bad that after that well-orchestrated finale, the makers of *The Fear* undercut themselves and throw in an unnecessary pitch for Morty's return cinematic engagement.

***The Girl with the Hungry Eyes* * 1/2 (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christina Fulton (Louise); Isaac Turner (Carlos); Leon Herbert (Johnny); Bret Carr (Bud); Susan Rhodes (Mandy); Leroy Jones (Zippo); Omar Martinez (Rico); Jon Jacob (Henry); Alix Koramzay (Elphin Girl); Taylor Clifton (Gypsy Dancer); David Colton (Old Bum); Adrian Jacobs (Art Critic).

CREW: Golden Shadow Productions, and Merton Shapiro and Cassian Elwes present a Kastenbaum Films/Smoking Gun Production of a Jon Jacobs Film. *Production Designer:* Clare Brown. *Sound Design:* George Lockwood. *Music:* Paul Inder, Oscar G. Lochlainn. *Costume Designer:* Evelina Diaz. *Art Director:* Tony Parras. *Film Editor:* Ethan Holzman. *Cinematography:* Gary Tieche. *Executive Producer:* David Niven, Jr., Cassian Elwes. *Inspired by the story by:* Fritz Leiber. *Produced by:* Michael Kastenbaum and Seth Kastenbaum. *Written and directed by:* Jon Jacobs. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On the eve of being demolished, the Tides Hotel in South

Beach, Florida, resurrects a long-dead pin-up model from the 1930s, Louise (Fulton), in order to acquire the hotel's deed. Now a blood-seeking vampire, Louise attempts to get the key to a safe deposit box from a model photographer, Carlos (Turner), and agrees to do a shoot with him. She arranges special conditions, however: he must never follow her home; she must never meet any of his associates; and they must always shoot at night. Carlos grows ever more curious about Louise, and breaks the rules...

COMMENTARY: The 1990s brought curious viewers the advent of "horror erotica," direct-to-video horror movies featuring a strongly sexual bent. It's easy to understand why this occurred: sex sells, and it's cheap to film too. No elaborate special effects necessary; just two hot bodies if the flesh is willing.

This adaptation of the 1949 Fritz Leiber story "The Girl with the Hungry Eyes" focuses on the sexual elements of this tale of a vampire pin-up and features several scenes of simulated intercourse. The scene's final sex sequence occurs in a blood-soaked bed with the two leads squishing and squirming about in the scarlet fluid. It's not exactly erotic, but it is undeniably impassioned.

The Girl with the Hungry Eyes is weird, dreamy and somewhat surreal. The vampire, Louise (Fulton), commits her bloody killings at the behest of a talking hotel. Unlike the talking parasite in *Baby Blood* (1990), the disembodied hotel shouts all of its direction at the top of its non-existent lungs. It talks a lot ... which kind of ruins the effect.

Anyway, Fulton overacts a bit in the role, doing too much with her bulging eyes and her puckered, collagenated lips. Still, you get the feeling she's attempting an interpretation of the 1922 *Nosferatu* in her expressions and her dance-like, exaggerated movements, so maybe being over-the-top is part of the game. Good or bad, Fulton is impossible to turn away from.

Where *The Girl with the Hungry Eyes* excels is in film style. It features a sweaty, Miami setting and showcases it to good effect. It also vets some avant garde visual moments, which makes it simultaneously sleazy and arty.

Unfortunately, the narrative is somewhat incoherent, and the film features more than its fair share of bad moments. Specifically, Fulton's Louise appears before many of her victims in full vampire regalia, meaning that her vampire fangs are fully and permanently evident, even at a distance. Does this fact discourage any of her would-be sexual partners? Not in the least.

You'd think someone would at least mention what sharp teeth she seems to have.

In terms of the narrative—unless I missed something—the movie never explains how Carlos, the photographer, puts together the information that Louise requires the key to the safety deposit box (which stores the hotel's deed). He gets the key back from a bum, goes to the safe deposit box (how did he know what the key went to, and at which bank?) and then presents the deed to Louise. This is accommodating of him, but I'm not certain how he came to understand that this is what his vampiric model was after.

The modeling photo shoots in *The Girl with the Hungry Eyes* are absolutely hilarious too. Fulton vamps about like a freak, pulling her hair up like horns, cloaking her hands behind raised fists, cocking her leg like she's ready to take a piss, and so on. Naturally, Carlos' boss just loves these poses!

In the next photo shoot, just to mix things up, Louise strikes exactly the same poses.

No one is going to argue that *The Girl with the Hungry Eyes* is a good movie, or even a particularly coherent one, but it doesn't lack for individuality. It doesn't look like it was churned out in an industrial process, like virtually every movie on the direct-to-video market. It's strange and goofy. That's not exactly a recommendation, I admit, but it's not a total rejection, either.

Grim 1/2 (DTV)

Cast and Crew

CAST: Emmanuel Xuereb (Rob); Tres Hanley (Penny); John Chancer (Steve); Kadamba (Katie); Michael Fitzpatrick (Ken); Nesba Crenshaw (Trish); Jules De Jongh (Sarah); Nadia De Lemeny (Mary); Peter Tregloan (Grim); David Kennedy (Mary's Husband); Louise Hickson (Wendy).

CREW: A Peak Viewing Production, a Paul Matthews Film.
Executive Producer: Robert Baruc. *Monster Designed by:* Niell R. Gorton.
Production Designer: David Endley. *Director of Photography:* Alan Trow.
Film Editor: Peter H. Matthews. *Music:* Dennis Michael Tenney.
Associate Producer: Amy Moore. *Produced by:* Elizabeth Matthews.
Written and directed by: Paul Matthews. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:*

86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The houses in Woodland Hills are collapsing because of a vast mine system stretching underneath the neighborhood. A mining expert comes to visit the community, even as neighbors begin to disappear out of sight. The vanishing men and women are victims of the evil, inhuman troll Grim, who was conjured by magic and has been capturing and eating the locals. A descent into the caves reveals the truth behind the beast, and a way to stop him once and for all.

COMMENTARY: Before *The Descent* (2006), there was *Grim*. And thank God for *The Descent*, since it washed away all memories of *Grim*.

Grim opens with a freeze-frame shot of the moon. The shot lasts long enough for the audience to determine that it is, well, a freeze-frame.

After such an inauspicious beginning, the film then follows a hulking troll monster named Grim as he abducts the residents of a town by opening mystical portals directly into their homes. One human who dabbles in magic is responsible for Grim's spree. "Last week, we had a séance," he explains ruefully.

Yeah, yeah, mistakes were made. Yada yada yada.

Throughout these early scenes, the audience comes to detect that the prosthetic mouth on the hairy Grim costume can't actually open fully, so the beast just kind of impotently half-snarls at his prey, jaw clenched.

After a while, seven only vaguely distinguishable characters, led by a mining expert, descend into the mines to find Grim and the missing residents of Woodland Hills. And then all forward momentum in the narrative just freezes.

The movie actually stalls as the audience is treated to apparently endless scenes of people walking through dark caves, intercut with the monster lumbering his way through—wait for it—different caves.

Occasionally, the view changes to red-hued Grim-o-vision of the monster walking through the caves. Then a scantily clad woman (a prisoner of Grim's) appears too, also in a cave. But then it's back to this movie's real love: views of people walking through subterranean caves some more.

Boy, the producers sure got their money's worth out of those caves, and I suppose they were bound and determined to keep

showing them.

In the end, the evil Grim actually becomes one with a cave ... encased forever in stone.

Seriously, you'll feel like you've joined him. If this isn't the most boring, empty horror film ever made, it has to be in contention.

***Halloween VI: The Curse of Michael Myers* * ***

Critical Reception

"Yawn. Never offer a cliff-hanger ending in one movie, wait YEARS for the follow-up, replace the lead actress, and then serve up this dreck. Probably the worst Michael mask, the chunkiest Michael, and the closest thing to a bridging sequel between *Halloween III: Season of the Witch* (!) and insert any other film in the series here. But for what it's worth, we should be grateful—this one set the bar so low for the future that *Halloween: H20* couldn't help but knock our socks off."— William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"Horror filmmakers spent much of the 1990s squeezing the life out of the seemingly unstoppable franchises of the 1980s. *Halloween 6* serves as a good case study for how this happened. Writer Dennis Farrands was appointed with the task of resurrecting Michael Myers and explaining the mysteries and inconsistencies of the open-ended *Halloween 5*. Farrands loyally tried to tie up the loose ends by introducing a cult devoted to *protecting* Michael Myers for pseudo-religious reasons. This new dimension in the series mythology might have revitalized the series, but the finished film couldn't bear the extra weight. For the most part, it remains a simple-minded slasher. The abrupt ending fails to resolve all of the issues that had been peripherally raised, and the real-life death of actor Donald Pleasence insured that the producers wouldn't get a chance to remedy their mistakes. Even an Internet-circulated 'producer's cut' of the film—purportedly more faithful to the script—feels hopelessly rushed. *Halloween 6* was a sad last gasp for the original series."— Joseph Maddrey, author of *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Donald Pleasence (Dr. Loomis); Paul Rudd (Tommy Doyle); Marianne Hagen (Kara Strode); Kim Darby (Mrs. Strode); Bradford English (Mr. Strode); Keith Bogart (Tim Strode); Mitchell Ryan (Dr. Wynn); J.C. Brandy (Jamie Lloyd); Devin Gardner (Danny Strode); George P. Wilbur (The Shape); Mariah O'Brien (Beth); Leo Geter (Barry Simms); Janice Knickrehm (Mrs. Blankenship); Susan Swift (Mary).

CREW: Dimension Films and Moustapha Akkad present a Nightfall Production. *Casting:*

Ross Brown, Mary West. *Production Designer:* Bryan Ryman. *Music:* Alan Howarth. *Halloween Theme:* John Carpenter. *Film Editor:* Randolph K. Bricker. *Director of Photography:* Billy Dickson. *Executive Producer:* Moustapha Akkad. *Written by:* Daniel Farrands. *Produced by:* Paul Freeman. *Directed by:* Joe Chappelle. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After giving birth to the son of Michael Myers, an adult Jamie Lloyd (Brandy) escapes from the Thorn Cult under Smith's Grove Hospital with the infant and calls into Barry Simms' Back Talk radio show in hopes of contacting Dr. Loomis (Pleasence). Michael soon tracks down and murders Jamie, but the child is rescued at the Haddonfield Bus Depot by Tommy Doyle (Rudd), a young man who encountered Michael Myers back on the night of October 31, 1978. When Michael returns to Haddonfield in search of his child, he finds that Laurie's family, the Strodes, have moved into his home and begins killing the family. Kara Strode (Hagen) escapes Michael's wrath but is worried that her young son, Danny (Gardner), seems to hear the same evil voices that drove a young Michael to kill. Meanwhile, Loomis uncovers the Thorn cult and a secret genetic experimentation program.

COMMENTARY: The original *Halloween* (1978) was a model of ruthless horror efficiency. It was so simple—so pure—it was absolute genius. With few narrative or character detours, John Carpenter and Debra Hill crafted an elegant, minimalist masterpiece based on a few core ideas: *Halloween*, *babysitting*, and *the Boogeyman*. With a craftsman and neo-classicist like Carpenter at the film's helm, that's all that the movie required for escape velocity, and accordingly, a generation of enthusiastic film reviewers (this one included) have

spent untold hours interpreting the 1978 exercise in terror in every way conceivable.

But under every such analysis was the recognition (sometimes denied) that no interpretation could adequately explain Michael Myers and his evil. That's what made him scary. His evil was suffusing and blank ... like that white Shatner mask. And on it, audience members could imprint the things that terrified them the most.

By *Halloween 2* (1981), more meat was added to the bones of the *Halloween* franchise. Michael was no longer merely an archetypal masked Boo -geyman preying on the innocents of American suburbia ... he was actually the long-lost brother of Jamie Lee Curtis's character, Laurie Strode. This familial association provided the motivation behind Michael's evil ways. In celebrating the ritual of Samhain, he was methodically picking off his kindred.



Michael Myers (George P. Wilbur) returns in *Halloween VI: The Curse of Michael Myers* (1995).

By the time of *Halloween V* (1989), an even-more-detailed mythology had blossomed around the once-minimalist Boogeyman. Michael was now hunting the daughter, Jamie Lloyd, of a dead Laurie Strode, and his "evil" nature had been traced back to a strange "Man in Black." Both Michael and that mysterious stranger shared a supernatural mark or "brand" on their forearms, one that signaled they belonged to a cult. That film ended in a cliffhanger, with Michael on

the loose, freed from jail by the Man in Black. (1978) It was genius. detours, John an elegant, core ideas: With

And so, six years later, we arrive at *Halloween VI: The Curse of Michael Myers*, a well-intentioned sequel so determined to answer questions, fill in details, and enrich the mythology that at times it forgets to present a cogent narrative or characters that audiences can care about. For instance, the film explains what happened to Jamie, attempts to set up the next Michael Myers (in the form of little Danny Strode, who hears voices telling him to kill), reveals the Celtic origins of Michael's evil nature, and then exposes us to the source of his seemingly invincible power: *genetic engineering*.

Oh, and the film also has Michael killing his sister's adopted family, the Strodes, apparently because there are no more Myers to finish off. And Tommy Doyle, the little boy that Laurie Strode was babysitting for in John Carpenter's film, is here too, cutting up headlines about Michael and programming his computer to translate Celtic Runes.

Halloween VI: The Curse of Michael Myers bears all the marks of a film made by a true, perhaps obsessive, fan of the series, someone who has collated every detail of the earlier films, and sincerely, courageously attempted to reconcile them.

When so many franchise horror films attempt to make you forget earlier entries (and *Halloween V* was a prime offender of that particular crime), this attempt is noble, and certainly commendable.

Yet, *Halloween VI* is a confusing mess and all the details, back-stories, voice-overs, conspiracies and explanations succeed only in muddying the very sense of horror that made Michael Myers such an iconic figure to begin with. What made *Halloween* succeed, in my estimation, was the film's sense of universality. If you ever babysat on Halloween night, you could identify with Laurie, Annie or Linda. If you ever had dreams of being chased by an unstoppable juggernaut, or were teased about the Boogeyman ... again, you could identify with the film's protagonists and heroes. There was something intrinsically relatable to in the very premise of *Halloween*, something primal that activated our shiver reflexes.

But this film is so slathered with minutiae that it can't be bothered to scare you. There's so much exposition to layer on here that poor Michael can't take his time and actually stalk his prey as he did in franchise entries past. Instead, he has to literally cut right to the kill, a fact which robs the film of atmosphere and build-up.

For instance, mid-way through the film, we follow the obnoxious talk-radio host Barry Simms into a van. Before Simms has even had a

chance to even get his bearings, Michael leaps out and cuts him, gullet to groin (like Candyman). There's no suspense and no build-up in this moment, just a sudden attack. And damningly, it's not even a very strong "jolt" moment. There was no indication beforehand that Michael was interested in Simms, and he seems to teleport from the Strode House to the van at the park and back again, to get it done.

It's tough being a slasher out there. Schedules to keep and all...

Simms isn't the only example of this slam bam, suspenseless approach. Characters like Mr. and Mrs. Strode, and to a lesser degree, Tim and Beth, also appear only to be executed, though Michael's reasons for killing them are pretty lame. Apparently, he doesn't like that the Strodes have moved into his house, so he murders them all.

And the house, by the way, is no longer the Gothic castle (decorated with the Thorn Symbol) that appeared in *Halloween V*. Now it seems to have morphed back into one of its more modest incarnations from previous series entries.

The obsessive fan in me appreciates some aspects of the film, such as Tommy's computer simulation of the Thorn Symbol. He notes that the symbol appears as a constellation in the night sky and always appears when Michael kills. That's a neat flourish, and the idea of Thorn—that one member of the tribe is "infected" or poisoned with "sickness" so that society at large is safe—is interesting too.

But again, it's so far from the established *Halloween* aesthetic that it feels jarring. Also, the explanation for Michael's murders—that he is killing his own tribesman as a kind of sacrifice—doesn't seem to hold up on close examination. By my reckoning, he has killed precisely three family members in six *Halloween* movies: his older sister, Laurie and Jamie. All the other teenagers, nurses, doctors, and policemen he kills have no familial relationship to him. The same goes for the Strodes. And actually, there's no notation in official *Halloween* canon that Michael went back at any time and killed his parents (who survived the massacre in 1963), or his surviving grandparents. So Tommy's theory is fascinating but extremely flawed.



The Shape, Michael Myers (George P. Wilbur), kills a nurse beneath Haddonfield in *Halloween VI: The Curse of Michael Myers*.

Much worse is the notion of attributing Michael Myers' strength and agility to genetic engineering. The final act of the film takes place in a laboratory wherein mad Dr. Wynn has been conducting experiments with DNA. This is a very 1990s-ish, Human Genome Project-style explanation for Michael Myers, but all it does is remove another layer of mystery from the Shape.

We now know he's a creation of technology, not psychology, and not the supernatural. That's akin to finding out that George Lucas's "Force" just consists of little beings called midi-chlorians.

The Curse of Michael Myers has some unanswered questions too. Exactly how was Jamie impregnated? I doubt it was done uh, directly by Michael, since his object is simply to kill his family members and since that's his mission throughout this film. Plus, he's often been depicted as a developmentally arrested child, one playing trick or treat games. Never, in all his films, has he been defined in terms of sexual appetites.

So ... how would you like to be the guy who had the assignment of collecting a sperm sample from Michael Myers?

Furthermore, what exactly is the green chemical in the syringes during the climax? How does Michael follow Jamie from Smith's Grove to a bus depot, to a farm, without benefit of a vehicle? Is he being shuttled by Dr. Wynn's people? If so, how do they control him?

How, in fact, does Michael get from the bus depot to the farm ahead of Jamie, when she isn't even planning to stop there? She's run off the road! In other words, she didn't know where she was going, but Michael did!

Despite all these problems, *The Curse of Michael Myers* is not nearly as risible as *Halloween V: The Return of Michael Myers* and doesn't feel the need to feature teenagers in primary roles. That's a relief. Also, there's a fast-paced, effectively-shot chase scene in Smith's Grove near the climax, and it really gets the blood pumping.

But then the genetically engineered fetus shows up, and then Michael dies when he gets injected with green chemicals and beaten with a pipe that is spray-painted silver. And then Dr. Loomis screams off-screen and, finally, your guess is as good as mine about what's supposed to be happening.

In the late 1990s, a producer's cut of *Halloween VI* circulated at conventions and on the Internet and for a while it was considered a kind of Holy Grail ... a film that would repair all the deficits of the theatrical cut. Although there were some interesting moments in that cut (particularly an unwelcome Thorn hand-off from Wynn to Loomis), overall the film was still decidedly mediocre.

After *Halloween VI: The Curse of Michael Myers*, the producers of *Halloween* had two options. They could continue digging themselves into a continuity rabbit hole, going further down the route of genetic engineering, Thorn Cults, green chemicals and mutant fetuses.

Or they could just pretend that *Halloween IV* through *VI* didn't really happen, and go back to Laurie Strode's original story.

They chose the latter path, which makes *Halloween VI: The Curse of Michael Myers* a sort of narrative dead-end. It may answer your

questions, but the arrival of *H2O* in 1998 actually makes your questions irrelevant. *H2O* had its own problems, but at least it remembered that the business of *Halloween* was scaring you.

It also remembered that runes, computers and genetic tampering weren't really necessary to accomplish that goal.

Hideaway * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jeff Goldblum (Hatch Harrison); Alicia Silverstone (Regina); Christine Lahti (Lindsey Harrison); Alfred Molina (Dr. Jonas Nyberg); Jeremy Sisto (Jeremy/Vassago); Rae Dawn Chong (Rose Orwetto); Kenneth Welsh (Detective Breech); Suzy Joachim (Dr. Dovell); Tom McBeath (Redlow); Joely Collins (Linda); Hiro Kanagawa (Nakamura); Tiffany Foster (Samantha).



Regina Harrison (Alicia Silverstone) is the quarry of a serial killer from beyond the grave in *Hideaway* (1995).

CREW: Tristar Pictures Presents an S/Q Production, a Brett Leonard Film *Casting:* Amanda Mackey, Cathy Sandrich. *Music:* Trevor Jones. *Visual Effects:* Tim McGovern. *Film Editor:* B.J. Sears. *Production Designer:* Michael Bolton. *Director of Photography:* Gale Tattersall. *Based*

on the novel by: Dean R. Koontz. *Written by:* Andrew Kevin Walker and Neal Jimenez. *Produced by:* Jerry Baerwitz, Agatha Hanczakowski, Gimel Everett. *Directed by:* Brett Leonard. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 106 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After a terrible car accident and a near death experience, Hatch Harrison (Goldblum) begins to experience strange, violent visions. In particular, he sees a Satanic serial killer Vassago (Sisto) murdering young women. Soon, Hatch realizes that his connection to the murderer goes both ways, and that the killer is observing Hatch's family ... including his beautiful teenage daughter Regina (Silverstone). Vassago captures Regina and takes her to his strange, Satanic sculpture, but Hatch and his wife Lindsey (Lahti) race to the rescue in a final battle between good and evil.

COMMENTARY: Brett Leonard's *Hideaway* won't awaken or light up any new portions of your brain, but it will activate the areas controlling recognition, since the movie is a clichéd amalgam of several 1990s horror conventions.

First off, we have the supernaturally-powered serial killer returning from the dead, in similar fashion to both *The First Power* (1990) and *Fallen* (1998). Then, there's *Hideaway's* "science run amok" angle, since all the terror begins with an evil doctor, Alfred Molina's Nyberg, who utilizes a revolutionary medical technique to save the life of those who have been pronounced dead for over an hour.

Then the movie pulls in the conceit of the teenage daughter menaced by a maniac, as seen in *Cape Fear* (1991), *Fear* (1996) and probably about a dozen other interloper style movies. This subplot always seems a cover for the real crux of the issue: *a father's fear of his teenage daughter's awakening sexuality and his own uncomfortable feelings about it.*

Finally, the movie lingers on the idea of a man sharing a psychic bond with a serial killer, a facet of such films as 1990's *Fear*, starring Ally Sheedy.

What makes *Hideaway* all the more insipid is the last act light show, in which avatars for good and evil duke it out, while the film's human characters look on in awe, sidelined in their own story.



Regina (Alicia Silverstone) and Dad, Hatch Harrison (Jeff Goldblum), plan a course of action to combat a psychic evil in *Hideaway*.

I should mention too that *Hideaway* attempts to be up-to-the-moment relevant by featuring a scene in America's rave culture, a venue of blue lights, strobes, black dresses, bobbing heads, and loud techno music. Of course, raves aren't the danger here, but rather another serial killer who is not just twisted but actually evil. In this case, Sisto is a proud Satanist who states flat out: "I don't want to be saved, I want to be damned."

Hideaway also offers Rae Dawn Chong in the clichéd role of supernatural medium. She comes up with wonderfully generic comments for her customers. "Why have you lost your trust?" she asks Harrison. "You crossed over. You brought something back with you," she reveals. These remarks make her about as useful as *Star Trek: The Next Generation's* resident psychic, Counselor Troi.

Although in general a fan of Jeff Goldblum and Christine Lahti, I don't find them particularly compelling in *Hideaway*. There's an early scene here where their characters drink wine and play a "movie" recognition game for a long time, oblivious to their daughter's alienation. No wonder Regina wants to act out: her parents are self-indulgent goofballs.

Hideaway got decent reviews when it was released but on retrospect, it's probably a good representation of everything that went wrong in 1990s horror. It relies on cliché after cliché, and then, in the last act, resorts to overwrought special effects to thrill an audience

instead of grappling with the narrative's underlying issues.

To use Hatch Harrison's own words against him, *Hideaway* is "trippy ... bad."

***The Ice Cream Man* * 1/2 (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Clint Howard (Gregory Tudor); Justin Isfeld (Johnny Spodak); Anndi McAfee (Heather Langley); JoJo Adams (Tuna Cassera); Mikea Le Breau (Small Paul); Sandahl Bergman (Marion Cassera); Andrea Evans (Wanda); Steve Garvey (Mr. Spodak); Olivia Hussey (Nurse Wharton); Doug Llewelyn (Store Manager); Lee Majors II (Detective Maldwyn); David Noughton (Martin Cassera); Jan-Michael Vincent (Detective Gifford); David Warner (the Reverend Langley); Zachary Benjamin (Roger Smith); Tom Reilly (Charley); Stephen Fiacchi (Gus).

CREW: Doublesteen Productions presents a David M. Goldstein Production, a Norman Apstein film. *Casting:* Lori Cobe. *Special Make-Up Effects:* Mark Garbarino. *Director of Photography:* Garrett Griffin. *Production Designer:* Ron Greenwood. *Film Editor:* Andre Vaillancourt. *Music:* Richard Lyons. David M. Goldstein. *Produced by:* Norman Apstein. *Story by:* David Dobkin. *Written by:* David Dobkin, Sven Davison. *Directed by:* Norman Apstein. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A deranged ice cream man, Gregory Tudor (Howard), prowls a suburban neighborhood kidnapping unsuspecting children. A group of kids follow the ice cream man after he abducts one of their own, Small Paul (Le Breau). Meanwhile, detectives Gifford (Vincent) and Maldwyn (Majors II) are also on the case. Tudor's psychosis, they learn, originates, in part, from his time at a mental hospital in the care of Nurse Wharton (Hussey).

COMMENTARY: Buyer beware: if you encounter Clint Howard's deranged Ice Cream Man, don't get the Rocky Road. The marshmallows are actually human eyeballs.

On second thought, don't take any ice cream from this kooky fellow: the buckets of tasty treats are loaded with guts, bugs and other unsavory bits too.

Sort of like this movie, actually.

Ice Cream Man establishes Howard as a grinning, murderous "grim fairy tale" villain along the lines of the Leprechaun or Rumpelstiltskin. The violence is a bit campy and over-the-top in presentation, and in one of *Ice Cream Man's* more memorable moments, Howard hands an unwitting customer a cone with the decapitated human head (of David Naughton) on it.

Whenever he kills, this Ice Cream Man also puns. "Brain freeze!," he quips madly. He even mentions "Good Humor" at one point, which is certainly politically incorrect.

Like many grim fairy tale-style horrors of the decade, *Ice Cream Man* actually deploys a familiar children's story (an honest-to-goodness Grimm story) to make its modern story more effective, resonant and relevant. Here, the legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin is recalled on several occasions.

In this famous story, a rat-catcher leads the children of Hamelin out of town to their eventual deaths when parents refuse to pay him for ratcatching. Another, more recent excavation of the legend suggests that the Pied Piper may have been an historical serial killer, and that too is something that carried weight in the 1990s.

Regardless of specifics, *Ice Cream Man* contextualizes Howard's villainous character as a modern variation of the Pied Piper archetype, luring children and adults to their deaths with the smiling promises of a tasty treat: delicious ice cream. At the same time the movie adopts this historical legend as its main conceit, it also takes pains to suggest that those who are once abused or traumatized become abusers themselves, the so-called "cycle of violence."

As a child, Gregory (Howard) witnessed the murder of the neighborhood ice cream man and was even splattered by his blood. He grew up to become a violent ice cream man himself. As the film goes on, Gregory abducts a boy named "Small Paul" (Le Beau), and the film's coda suggests that the boy will take on his ice cream/ violent work.

Ice Cream Man has much going for it in terms of originality of premise and also sense of humor but is undercut by several important elements. The first is the movie's soundtrack, which sounds entirely like ice cream truck music and is certain to drive you mad.

Secondly, Jan-Michael Vincent sleepwalks through his

performance as an investigating cop, never roused to a reaction beyond casual disinterest.

And thirdly, the opening sequence, a black-and-white sequence set in middle-class 1950s suburbia, makes no sense. In it, an ice cream man is gunned down in a drive-by (!), which doesn't seem typical of the Truman or Eisenhower eras. And more to the point, Clint Howard's character is the young traumatized child in that era ("who's going to bring us ice cream now?") The problem is that Howard was only thirty-five or so when the picture was made, making him far too young to have been a ten or eleven in the 1950s.

Still, it's hard to entirely dislike a horror movie in which a malevolent ice cream man puts two decapitated heads on pop-sickle sticks and then does a playful pantomime, a puppet show with them. Or one in which an ice cream truck's happy legend "Watch Out For Children" has been modified as a warning, "Watch Out Children."

The film's macabre imagination is something to be reckoned with, even if *Ice Cream Man* is often goofy. Still, there's undeniable power—strange, primal terror that only a child can truly understand—in the ice cream man's chilly warning to the kiddies. "You can't run from the Ice Cream Man. I know where you live."

That's a thought scary enough to melt a child's smile, or the coldest frozen dessert.

***In the Mouth of Madness* * * * 1/2**

Critical Reception

"A clever analysis of its genre, knowingly crafted with conventions, stereotypes and even a few ludicrously cheap scares ... with Carpenter, ready, willing and able to shift gears effortlessly between the hoary and horrific ... the kind of adult horror film that will give new hope to those longing to be scared at the movies again."—David E. Williams, *Sci-Fi Universe*, "Big Mouth: John Carpenter's Lovecraftian Return to His Roots Marks the Welcome Return of a Master," January 1995, pages 66–67

"What transforms *In the Mouth of Madness* from a fright into a disappointment is its reliance on that old standby: Real versus Imagined.... *In the Mouth of Madness* poses all the obvious

questions without encouraging any particular desire to know the answers ... all of which leaves *In the Mouth of Madness* stranded—a minor, oddly whimsical work, its narrative energy scattered and lost in blind alleys. You are left with those few, perfect Carpenter instants when the mood turns palpable, and fear begins to form like ice."—Anthony Lane, *The New Yorker*, "Scare Tactics," February 13, 1995

"The relationship between artist and audience has been navel-gazed to death by everyone from Charlie Chaplin to Peter Bogdanovich to Woody Allen to Wes Craven. It's interesting that a writer, rather than a filmmaker, is at the centre of *ITMOM*'s mystery, since the theme has been examined much more frequently in film than in literature."—John Bowen, *Rue Morgue*

"This is reportedly one of John Carpenter's favorites of his films. He'd dabbled with things Lovecraftian before, most notably in *Prince of Darkness*, but like *They Live* this film seems preoccupied with its message. Sam Neill gives a good performance and there were pieces of a good idea here—it just never seemed to gel together. Perhaps it's the fact that Neill's character is not particularly likable (if Donald Sutherland in his 1978 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* mode had played the part, this film might have worked better)."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Sam Neill (John Trent); Jurgen Prochnow (Sutter Cane); Julie Carmen (Linda Styles); Charlton Heston (Jackson Harglow); David Warner (Dr. Renn); Bernie Casey (Robbie); John Glover (Dr. Sapirstein); Peter Jason (Insurance Fraud Perpetrator); Frances Bay (Mrs. Pickman); Wilhelm Von Homburg (Simon); Kevin Rushton (Guard #1); Gene Mack (Guard #2); Conrad Bergschneider (Axe Maniac); Marvin Scott (Reporter); Katherine Ashby (Young Teen); Dennis O'Connor (Cop); Paul Brogren (Teen); Sharon Dyer (Homeless Lady); Sean Ryan (Bicycle Boy); Hayden Christensen (Paper Boy).

CREW: New Line Productions Presents a John Carpenter film. *Casting:* Back Seat Casting Associates. *Music:* John Carpenter and Jim Lang. *Special Make-up Effects:* Robert Kurtzman, Gregory Nicotero, Howard Berger. *Production Designer:* Jeff Steven Ginn. *Film Editor:* Edward A. Warschilka. *Director of Photography:* Gary B. Kibbe. *Written*

by: Michael De Luca. Produced by: Sandy King. Directed by: John Carpenter. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Insurance fraud investigator John J. Trent (Neill) recounts a strange story to a visiting doctor from his cell in a mental asylum. He explains how Jackson Harglow (Heston) at Arcane Publishing tasked him to find missing best-selling horror novelist, Sutter Cane (Prochnow). Trent and Harglow's editor-in-chief, Styles (Carmen), traced the author to the strange town of Hobb's End, where they learned of an apocalypse in the making. Sutter Cane believed his latest book, *In the Mouth of Madness*, would be the new Bible and open the door to an infestation in our world of monstrous, inhuman creatures. Now, as a plague of insanity spreads across the land, Trent is the only one who knows the truth...

COMMENTARY: *In the Mouth of Madness* should be considered the fourth and final movement of maverick director John Carpenter's so-called cerebral horror catalog. *The Fog* (1980), *The Thing* (1982) and *Prince of Darkness* (1987) comprise the earlier movies, and all suggested the world of man invaded by a powerful evil.

Though science diagnosed the crisis in the case of *The Thing* and *Prince of Darkness*, science was also determined untrustworthy as a method of destroying evil. Instead, in Carpenter's films, self-sacrifice (MacReady's in *The Thing*; Catherine's in *Prince of Darkness*) prevented the victory of evil and ensured the (temporary) survival of humanity.

In deliberate contrast to these ideas, *In the Mouth of Madness* exists outside the world of science and presents the audience no likable surrogate who is willing to die to save mankind. The film's hero, John Trent (Sam Neill), actually surrenders his humanity to the encroaching Lovecraftian horror as easily as he would go to see a matinee. In this film, the last man on Earth dies glued to the silver screen, chortling at his own "story" depicted there. Unlike Danforth or MacReady, Trent apparently no longer views man as worth saving, and finally, he is replaced by something else, something evil.

As you might guess, this film represents a darker, perhaps more hopeless, despairing side of John Carpenter. This side is embodied in John Trent, a character one step beyond typical Carpenter anti-heroes like Snake Plissken or Napoleon Wilson. Trent is openly disdainful of everyone and everything in the human realm. He hates the past (antiques are derided as "old shit"), he disapproves of the horror genre as "trash." And worse, he has no faith in humanity and goes so far as

to say, "The sooner that we're off the planet, the better."

Importantly, Trent finds pleasure in one thing: exposing human beings as frauds, proving, literally, that "anybody's capable of anything." Yet despite Trent's cynicism and overweening sense of misanthropy, he is a useful and effective character here because he is put in a situation where his humanity—which he hates—matters.

In 1968, George Taylor (played by Charlton Heston, who appears in *In the Mouth of Madness*) traveled to a planet of intelligent simians and found himself in a position to defend humanity from the new social order of *The Planet of the Apes*. Despite his stated misgivings about man as a species, he mounted his defense brilliantly and the character consequently became one of sci-fi's greatest protagonists.

By contrast, John Trent is confronted with a new social order and, intriguingly, is unable to mount any defense for mankind. Instead, he is shattered by the notion that his firmly-held convictions about reality are wrong. "We are not living in a Sutter Cane novel!" he continues to stubbornly insist, beyond all reason. Finally, he takes solace in a lonely insane asylum, the only sane place left in an insane world. The world really is doomed because man will not stand up for himself, warts and all, and there is no love, no hope, in the world depicted here.

Although *In the Mouth of Madness* is overtly nihilistic, it is also true to its own conviction, depicting an apocalyptic tale about the end of all human life on earth. The movie serves as a meditation on what it might be like to be the last, sane human in a world where insanity has become the norm.

Carpenter himself had a different take on the material, feeling that *In the Mouth of Madness* was a classic western: a story about a hero who goes in search of someone and ends up learning about himself. While that seems to be stretching it a bit, considering the Lovecraftian tenor and narrative complexity of the film, the description nonetheless provides viewers a descriptor they can grasp as the picture unfolds in baffling, unconventional fashion.

In the Mouth of Madness remains one of the 1990s' most remembered and applauded postmodern, self-reflexive horrors. Specifically, Carpenter presents a world where fiction and reality are intertwined through Sutter Cane's books and Trent's clashing interpretation of "objective reality."

In *The Mouth of Madness*, not entirely unlike *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*, involves characters in a story who realize that they are, indeed, but characters in a story. They think at first they have independent life, only to learn that life is more complex. Again, it's a

Pirandellian conceit. In *New Nightmare*, Heather Langenkamp learns she is a character in a screenplay; in *In the Mouth of Madness*, John Trent discovers he is a character in Sutter Cane's new horror novel.



John Trent (Sam Neill, center) is the last sane man on Earth in John Carpenter's *In The Mouth of Madness* (1994). Kevin Rushton (left) and Gene Mack are his guards.

What *In the Mouth of Madness* proves most conclusively is that a creator of a work (whether it be a film or a Sutter Cane novel) ultimately controls the rules of his universe. To critic Roger Ebert, the film violated a set of internal rules: it made no traditional, coherent, logical sense. There was no order to *In the Mouth of Madness*, only disorder and contradictions and reverses. What Ebert may not have detected was that John Carpenter is the Sutter Cane of this universe: a God who defines the rules. In this act of creation, the writer can write a character out (as Cutter eliminates Linda from the narrative), alter plotpoints (Trent delivers the manuscript to Harglow even though he has no memory of it), or even define the color of the sky for that matter ("My favorite color is blue," Cutter jokes, turning the world blue in one stroke).

The artistic creator, whether it be God, Carpenter or Cane, should be the ultimate authority in his universe and thus, in some sense, the only consistency that matters in that universe is the creator's consistency. So *In the Mouth of Madness* is really a film about the creative process and how "reality" can be twisted, perverted and recreated by authors, directors and deities. Did God write a book in which we are the characters? Did Sutter Cane?

Wes Craven's New Nightmare asserted that evil would become loose in society when horror was suppressed by those who thought it

was a bad influence. *In the Mouth of Madness* shares that point of view. In Carpenter's movie, evil grows in the event that people "lose the ability to know the difference between reality and fantasy."

Specifically, this means that politicians out there who argue that horror movies cause violence have lost the capacity to see film, even the horror film, as literary drama. Instead, they blame horror for society's ills, which in fact reflects society, not vice versa.

Where some critics interpreted *Sutter Cane* as an indictment of the popular horror novelist Stephen King, the opposite is true. *In the Mouth of Madness* does not attack the Stephen Kings of our world. It attacks those who would suppress the writings of Stephen King out of some misguided belief that they generate violence. Once more, what is repressed returns as cracks in reality, as physical symptoms.



**God is a hack horror writer: Sutter Cane (Jurgen Prochnow)
In the Mouth of Madness.**

To understand all of the self-awareness in *In the Mouth of Madness*, knowledge of horror history is a virtual requirement. The film's structure mirrors *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), opening

in media res— a late point of attack—as Trent is hauled into an insane asylum in a state of panic and screaming about the end of the world. Then the doctors hear his story and the story unfolds before the audience's eyes in a flashback. The Sutter Cane book is also like the sea pods, the catalyst by which human beings are transformed into monsters. Dr. Sapirstein, similarly, is named after a character in *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), and Hobb's End is a name culled from Nigel Kneale's *Quatermass* series.

On a visceral, gut-punch level Carpenter stages a number of effective jumps and jolts in this film. Early on, there is a sequence during which Styles spots a young man who is feverishly riding a bicycle on a lonely highway during the middle of the night. As Styles' car rushes past the cyclist we get a shot of him in the rear-view mirror and he is bathed in the red hues of the car's taillights for a brief instant before blending irrevocably in with the darkness. Was the fleeing image a dream, a hallucination? The answer is uncertain, but when the image of the bicyclist repeats, the same young bicyclist is now an impossibly old man, one who says that Sutter Cane won't let him out.

This is a scary, even chilling image because it is one we all can relate to. The idea of being alone at night in a car, when a stranger suddenly appears, requires no knowledge of the genre (or Lovecraft), merely experience in day-to-day reality and the unspoken language of nightmares. The idea of a young man, repeating his path endlessly, until his life is gone, is weird and terrifying. Carpenter is good about picking up on these little moments that feel wrong, that feel menacing, and *In the Mouth of Madness* is filled with such instances.

Although sometimes oft-putting because there is no likable lead character to follow, *In the Mouth of Madness* impresses, in a cold, detached way. The end of the human world would seem to be cause for high-emotion, for panic, but this apocalypse film from John Carpenter is glacial and intentionally distancing.

Its favorite color is blue.

Jack- O * *

CAST: Linnea Quigley (Carolyn Miller); Rebecca Wicks (Linda Kelly); Gary Doles (David Kelly); Ryan Latshaw (Sean Kelly); Catherine Walsh (Vivian Machen); Rachel Carter (Julie Miller); Tom Feda (Jim); Bill Cross (Richard Watson); Helen Keeling (Amanda Watson); John Carradine (Walt Machen); Cameron Mitchell (Dr. Cadaver); Brinke Stevens (Witch); Dawn Wildsmith (Sorceress); Jack-O-Lantern (Patrick Moran); Ron Bernard (Rush Gingbaw).

CREW: American Independent Presents a Sharan Production of a Steve Latshaw Film. *Director of Photography:* Maxwell J. Beck. *Film Editor:* Wayland Strickland. *Music:* Jeffrey Walton. *Co-Executive Producer:* John McCollister. *Written by:* Patrick Moran. *Based on a Story by:* Fred Olen Ray and Brad Linaweaver. *Executive Producer:* Fred Olen Ray. *Produced by:* Patrick Moran and Steve Latshaw. *Directed by:* Steve Latshaw. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On the eve of Halloween, three troubled teenagers fooling around in a graveyard accidentally raise the local boogeyman, The Pumpkin Man called Jack-O-Lantern. Meanwhile, a journalist named Vivian (Walsh) visits the Kelly family and informs young Sean Kelly (Latshaw) and his parents that their ancestors once battled the same demon after tarring a local man, Walt Machen (Carradine), as a witch. Now the demon has returned to punish the Kelly family. Either Sean must destroy the Jack-O-Lantern, or the Jack O Lantern will destroy him...

COMMENTARY: No, *Jack-O* is not a thriller about pop-star Michael Jackson. But objectively, it is sort of "bad" (come on ... you know it).

Produced by Fred Olen Ray and directed by Steve Latshaw, *Jack-O* is a low-budget variation on the much superior Stan Winston film of 1989, *Pumpkinhead*. Here, a killer that children call "The Pumpkin Man" is summoned from his overgrown grave to commit bloody vengeance against a prominent, local family, the Kellys.

So yeah, its *Vengeance the Demon* again, only filmed in extremely rudimentary fashion, with virtually no suspense and pretty bad acting too. In execution, the film is pretty indefensible.

That lack of overall quality established, *Jack-O*, however, was filmed in 1993 and therefore stands tall as one of the first American horror films to pointedly comment on the tidal wave of the "Angry

White Men" and "Dittoheads" who swept Newt Gingrich into power in the mid-term elections of 1994.

Here, a waspy Republican couple sits before their TV set on Halloween night and watches not the fun horror show called *Dr. Cadaver* (Mitchell), but rather a genuine American horror: Rush Gingbaw (Ron Bernard), an obvious surrogate for conservative radio personality Rush Limbaugh.

On television, Rush Gingbaw informs the suburban Republicans that he's tired of Americans having "to apologize for not being homeless, handicapped or a minority," a nativist, rabbleroxing argument that pretty clearly reflects the right-wing belief that "political correctness" was being enforced upon them early in the Clinton Era and that entrenched special interests like—you know, *crippled people*—were trying to get one over on that most imperiled of near-extinct species: the American white man.

Later in *Jack-O*, the eliminationist arguments of the extreme American Right find voice in TV's Rush Gingbaw commentary too. The bloated personality states: "Love your neighbors ... if they're real Americans. But if they're bleeding heart liberals, then they don't deserve to live. They don't deserve to breathe the air you could be breathing. Just think about that: they're stealing your air."

This commentary is so close to the authentic beliefs of Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, G. Gordon Liddy, Ann Coulter and other heroes of the radical right that they hardly qualify as satire. But *Jack-O* draws an interesting comparison between liberals and conservatives. The horror-loving, liberal Kelly family stages a Halloween night "haunted garage" to raise money for the homeless: an act of compassion (those bleeding hearts!).

Meanwhile, the Republican patriarch, when visited by innocent young trick-or-treaters, berates the costumed children for wanting a handout. "If you want something from me," he says, "you have to pay for it."

Clearly, he's a compassionate conservative.

In one of *Jack-O*'s legitimately funny moments, the Republican suburbanites lose TV reception and the buttoned-down, repressed wife suggests that they get cable TV. The husband responds that cable is an invention of the "liberal media" (a description made famous by George Bush senior during the 1992 presidential election) and then further warns that media will have to take his prized TV antenna from his "cold, dead hands."

Of course, that particular quote was later popularized by NRA

president Charlton Heston, specifically in relation to gun ownership, the Second Amendment, and 2000 candidate Al Gore.

For all its myriad failings in execution, *Jack-O* certainly labors to make a point about political polarization and the culture war in 1990s America. On one TV set is broadcast a standard horror show (*Dr. Cadaver*): the kind that meets with objections from censorious organizations such as the Moral Majority for featuring violence and overt sexuality.

But interestingly, the movie then cross-cuts to that Republican couple as they watch on TV a character who is actually *preaching* violence and hatred against fellow Americans because they hold different political views.

Which program is the real danger in a civil society?

Commendably, this is not an irrelevant question in *Jack-O* because the source of all the trouble in the film is an old family feud between the Machens and the Kellys, a feud based on ... *surprise, surprise*, different belief systems. Old Walter Machen was believed to be a witch and was destroyed because of it.

Every now and then, the very low-budget *Jack-O* features a beautiful shot (and they all tend to low-angle compositions). For example, an early shot features a plastic pumpkin in the foreground as a school bus pulls up in the background. Later, in the cemetery, there's a great earth-level shot of the stick grave marker/crucifix over Jack-O's grave.

Some of the gore is quite impressive too. One wishes the rest of the film had as much visual flair and distinction as these isolated compositions, but the whole production is hampered by a lack of thrills and amateurish acting.

Still, as rough-hewn and unpolished as *Jack-O* is, it is undeniably ambitious. It reaches for that highest plateau of the horror genre: aspiring to comment about events the makers detect as important to modern viewers. On these aspirations, the film can certainly be lauded (and regarded as relevant). But by the end of *Jack-O*, there's no magic, and the movie is just a regular old pumpkin again—neither particularly scary nor particularly well-made.

Lepr echaun 3 * 1/2

Cast and Crew

CAST: Warwick Davis (Leprechaun); John Gatins (Scott); Lee Armstrong (Tammy); Marcelo Tubert (Gupta); John De Mita (Fazio); Caroline Williams (Loretta); Michael Callan (Mitch); Tom

Dugan (Art); Leigh-Allyn Baker (Waitress); Linda Shane (Nurse); Ian Gregory (Doctor); Terry Lee Crisp (Elvis)

CREW: Trimark Pictures Presents a Blue Rider/ Trimark Production, a Brian Trenchard-Smith Film. *Casting:* Tedra Gabriel. *Production Design:*

Ken Aichele. *Make-up Special Effects:* Gabe Bartelos. *Music:* Dennis Michael Tenney. *Film Editor:* Daniel Duncan. *Director of Photography:* David Lewis. *Executive Producer:* Mark Amin. *Based on Characters created by:* Mark Jones. *Written by:* David Bubos. *Produced by:* Jeff Geoffray, Walter Josten, Henry Seggelman. *Directed by:* Brian Trenchard-Smith. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

P.O.V.: "Two Leprechauns is one too many."— The Leprechaun (Warwick) decries his competition in *Leprechaun 3*.

SYNOPSIS: The leprechaun (Davis) is resurrected in Las Vegas after a squirrely pawnbroker (Tubert) removes a magic medallion that has been keeping the imp locked inside a stone statue. The leprechaun kills the pawnbroker while in search of a missing shilling from his treasure, and the corpse is discovered by an impressionable out-of-towner, Scott (Gatins). After finding the missing shilling, Scott uses the coin's "wish" to become a winner of roulette at the nearby Lucky Shamrock Casino. The coin quickly passes from person to person at the Casino, with each wish ending up badly. All the while, the Leprechaun pursues.

COMMENTARY: If two leprechauns is one too many, as the evil imp insightfully notes in this second sequel to 1993's *Leprechaun*, then how about three *Leprechaun* movies? That's two too many, right?

Judging by the lackluster quality of this film, that's certainly the case. This is bottom drawer, off-the-shelf direct-to-video filmmaking with terrible performances that make the acting in *Leprechaun* and *Leprechaun 2* look like work by the Royal Shakespeare Company.

And if the acting isn't enough to turn you off of *Leprechaun 3*, there's the dead pacing. The leprechaun spends the film's first twenty-five minutes locked in the back room of a Las Vegas pawn shop,

stumbling around in the dark in search of his gold shilling.

Production design is a stumbling block too: the "big" Vegas casino in the film, the Lucky Shamrock, doesn't so much resemble a real casino as it does a convention hall or town hall where the movie company could afford to shoot cheaply. Still, credit director of photography David Lewis for making the best of a bad situation: he shoots the set (and particularly the games of chance) like he's just seen Martin Scorsese's *Casino* (1995) for the first time; with dazzling overhead shots, close-ups, and other dramatic flourishes.

Leprechaun 3 spends an inordinate amount of time on the magic wishes of uninteresting characters (like Fazio the Magician), rather than actually depicting the latest Leprechaun reign of terror. On one hand, originality is always commendable, and there's nothing wrong with a variation on a theme. On the other hand ... is this why people go to see a *Leprechaun* movie? To see down-on-their-luck losers granted wishes while playing games in Vegas?

This third franchise entry also plays fast and loose with the leprechaun rules established in earlier films. For instance, here a bite by the leprechaun turns the bitten victim into a leprechaun himself, much as in the famous lore of the werewolf. In the case of the *Leprechaun 3*, the infected person begins spouting bad rhymes and experiencing a craving for potatoes.

Even the method of defeating the leprechaun has changed radically: here destroying the pot of gold also destroys the monster. The folks inhabiting *Leprechaun* and *Leprechaun 2* might be interested to hear that news, since that avenue wasn't available to them in their adventures.

In the final analysis, even low-brow fare like *Leprechaun 3* should at least make a token attempt to be scary. But this film isn't scary in the slightest. One gore scene, however, is worth mentioning, though it appears near the end of a very longseeming film. The scene involves the leprechaun taking the stage, and using a saw to cut the magician Fazio in half. As you might guess, the results are messy.

One scene in *Leprechaun 3* does seem to acknowledge the 1990s context in a funny way too. Late in the film, Scott is taken to the hospital when he begins exhibiting signs of encroaching leprechaunism. The doctors (who diagnose him with a "virulent fungus") find his gambling winnings on him and promptly start to order a batch of unnecessary, expensive tests

In the year after Hilary Clinton's health-care proposal went down in flames, this on-the-nose stab at rising costs in health care is pretty explicit and also pretty funny even if it is out of step tonally with the

remainder of the film.

In its climax, *Leprechaun 3* has the audacity to quote from *Casablanca*. But this film isn't at all emblematic of a burgeoning, beautiful friendship.

On the contrary, it's just another in a long line of bad 1990s sequels. Of all the DVD players in all the houses all over the world, *Leprechaun 3* had to land in mine?

Lord of Illusions * * 1/2

Cast and Crew

CAST: Scott Bakula (Harry D'Amour); Kevin J. O'Connor (Philip Swann); Famke Janssen (Dorothea Swann); Vincent Schiavelli (Vinovich); Daniel Van Barger (Nix); Susan Taylor (Pimm); Joseph Latimer (Quaid); Sheila Towsey (Jennifer Desiderio); Trevor Edmond (Young Butterfield); Wayne Grace (Loomis); Johnny Venokur (Tapert); Barry Del Sherman (Butterfield).

CREW: United Artists Presents a Seraphim Production. *Casting:* Sharon Howard-Field. *Executive Producer:* Sgurjon Sighratsson. *Music:* Simon Boswell. *Costume Designer:* Luke Reichler. *Film Editor:* Alan Baumgarten. *Production Designer:* Stephen Hardie. *Director of Photography:* Ronn Schmidt. *Produced by:* Jo Anne Sellar, Clive Barker. *Written for the screen and directed by:* Clive Barker. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 122 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A down-on-his luck private eye who has just resolved a terrifying case involving demonic possession, Harry D'Amour (Bakula) takes a seemingly-simple case that leads him into the secretive world of magician Phillip Swann (O'Connor) and his gorgeous young wife, Dorothea (Janssen). When Swann is killed in a stage accident turned deadly, D'Amour learns more about the magician's hidden past, a past that involved a powerful black magician, a terrifying cult leader called Nix (Van Barger). All signs point to Nix's resurrection and the zealot's desire to reconnect with his former followers, including Dorothea.

COMMENTARY: Horror and film noir often fit hand-in-glove.

Exemplary instances of the form include 1987's *Angel Heart* by Alan Parker, and this decade's *The Ninth Gate* from Roman Polanski. Clive Barker's *Lord of Illusions* is another horror noir, but it's not really in the same class as either of the above-listed examples. In large part this is because the central case, involving a black magic cult doesn't boast much personal significance to the film's investigating private dick, a bland Scott Bakula playing Harry D'Amour.

In keeping with the formula, D'Amour struggles in *Lord of Illusions* with a case from his recent past, a case involving the supernatural. The film flashes back to the case and some frightening, hellish images, but ultimately it's just a stock touch, a "trauma" in the past that doesn't explicitly impact D'Amour's journey in the film.

Lord of Illusions is not without interest. The opening and closing sequences, set in a desert home, the headquarters of a black magic cult, suggest a certain, unsettling kind of madness, and one that seemed to be brewing in the United States again in the 1990s after a long slumber. Following so soon after the Waco incident with the Branch-Davidians, the cult-oriented material in *Lord of Illusions* plays as powerful and disturbing.

Here, the charismatic cult leader, Nix (Daniel Van Barger), is not just mesmerizing, but supernatural, beckoning lonely, sick individuals to his cause. One of the closing scenes, during which Nix returns from the dead and demands that his followers "come unto" him, is very-well orchestrated. His "flock" drops to their knees ... on broken glass. And then he really puts the screws to them.

Barker also has a strong organizing principle underlying the film: the notion of two forms of magic, one belonging to the illusionist and one belonging to someone who could be much more sinister ... like Nix. This potentially interesting material is something that D'Amour stumbles upon, but it doesn't seem to impact him personally or psychologically ... just professionally. It may be Bakula's performance—he practically reeks of boy scout—but D'Amour never seems engaged enough in the film's big case; he's just tallying up the clues.

And Bakula's not the only one miscast. Kevin J. O'Connor is a big disappointment as the master magician, Swann. He doesn't have the requisite screen presence to pull off the role of a flamboyant David Copperfield figure and is a big black hole in the movie's narrative. The audience never likes Swann, or even really cares about him. Whether he's dead or not—a big mystery of the film—hardly seems to matter.

Perhaps because characters like Swann and D'Amour feel so remote, *Lord of Illusions* ultimately hinges on some admirable, icily precise horror set-pieces. One, involving Swann's death, an example of

stagecraft gone horribly wrong, is a real doozy. A ceiling mounted device begins to drop swords on Swann, who is below the device, bound up on stage. In great detail, Barker reveals how just one little accident in timing leads to egregiously bloody death. Before the scene is over, Swann has been perforated by swords in the torso, in the leg, and one arm. The scene is shot with care and skill, and evidences a sense of the grotesque and the inevitable.



Two images of director Clive Barker (on the right, with Scott Bakula in black) on the set of United Artists' *Lord of Illusions* (1995).



In the belly of the beast: *Lord of Illusion's* (1995) Harry D'Amour (Scott Bakula) and Dorothea Swann (Famke Janssen) return to the house where Dorothea first experienced the heart of Nix.

There's a nod to *Chinatown* here too. Instead of wearing a bandage on his nose, D'Amour is seen throughout the adventure with a bandage on his hand. But maybe *film noir* was the wrong way to approach the story of magic versus illusion. By having a sort of impartial third party, D'Amour, at the center of the tale, it feels like there's nothing at stake. The movie features great dialogue, like the conclusion that "we have to agree on what's real and what's not; that's what holds us together," an important lesson in the mid-1990s as America's partisan divide began an untraversable gulf.



But *Lord of Illusions* is over-long and undercooked. The noir hero can't just be an observer; his very soul has to be on the line if the format is to work well in the horror genre. And that's just not the case here.

The Mangler *1/2

Critical Reception

"The best part of the movie is the fetid, oppressive atmosphere Hooper works up inside the sweatshop that evocatively serves as an industrial Hell. The Mangler itself is an imposing creation, and its gory activities ... pack an occasional chill."— Michael Gingold, *The 1996 Motion Picture Annual Guide*, 1996, page 199

"A mess, trying to mix too many horror genres and succeeding at none."—Bill Hoffman, *New York Post*, March 4, 1995, page 15

"There's not much to recommend in *the Mangler* ... other than—and you should be ashamed if this is what you want—its many gory shots of arms, heads and bodies being crushed, and my personal favorite, a dying man hocking bloody sputum directly into the camera lens."—Leah Rozen, *People Weekly*, March 27, 1995, page 18

"I admit it: I was one of the three people who saw this film in the theater. I fell for the advertising that proclaimed it as the work of three modern masters of horror: writer Stephen King, director Tobe Hooper, and actor Robert Englund. And despite the film's many shortcomings, I submit that it is an honest reflection of at least two of these three talents. King wrote the short story 'The Mangler' when he was in college, working summers at a blue-collar laundry in rural Maine. What distinguishes the short story, as well as the film, is not the monster but the dehumanizing daily grind of life in such a place. The vision is as bleak and unforgiving as the everyday world of disenfranchised slaughterhouse workers in Hooper's masterpiece *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* or the post-apocalyptic American waste land in his recent *Masters of Horror* episode 'Dance of the Dead.' Englund, unfortunately, turns his character into a sideshow host—à la Freddy Krueger in the later *Nightmare* sequels—instead of a genuinely scary villain. What is scary is the anger and ultimate hopelessness of this story—particularly in scenes revolving around the enigmatic character of J.J. Pictureman. That nihilistic tone might not make *The Mangler* fun to watch, but it does make it powerful."—Joseph Maddrey, *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*

"This might very well be the lamest of all the Stephen King cinematic adaptations, and that's really saying something. Imagine a horror movie about a killer laundry folder. Yep, it's exactly as bad as you'd think. Even Robert Englund is off his game, and the presence of Ted 'Buffalo Bill' Levine isn't enough to save things."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Robert Englund (Bill Gartley); Ted Levine (Johnny Hunton); Daniel Matmor (Mark Johnson); Jeremy Crutchley (Pictureman); Vanessa Pike (Sherry Ouelette); Demetre Phillips

(Stanner); Lisa Morris (Lin Sue); Vera Blacker (Mrs. Frawley); Ashley Hayden (Annette Gillian); Danny Keogh (Herb Diment); Ted Liplat (Dr. Ramos); Todd Jensen (Roger Marlin); Jeremy Crutchley (Mortician); Sean Taylor (Derrick Gates); Gerrit Schoonhoven (Aaron Rodriguez); Nan Hamilton (Ms. Ellenshaw); Adrian Waldron (Mr. Ellenshaw); Larry Taylor (Sheriff Hughes); Irene Trangs (Mrs. Smith); Megan Wilson (Ginny Johnson); Odile Rault (Alberta); Ron Smerczak (Officer Steele).



Robert Englund (left) aims for eternal life in the Tobe Hooper–Stephen King collaboration *The Mangler* (1995).

CREW: New Line Cinema and Anant Singh present a Distant Horizon production in association with Filmex Ltd. And Allied Film Productions, a Tobe Hooper Film. *Casting:* Christa Shamberger. *Make-up Effects:* Scott Wheeler. *The Mangler created by:* William Hooper. *Production Design:* Dave Barkham. *Music:* Barrington Pheloung. *Director of Photography:* Amnon Salomon. *Film Editor:* David Heitner. *Based on a short story by:* Stephen King. *Executive Producers:* Helena Spring, Harry Alan Towers, Sudhir Pragjee, Sanjeev Sing. *Produced by:* Anant Singh. *Written by:* Tobe Hooper, Stephen Brooks, Peter Welbeck. *Directed by:* Tobe Hooper. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 106 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Riker's Valley, the Blue Ribbon Laundry experiences a terrible accident when a young worker, Sherry (Pike), is injured by a HadleyWilson press machine affectionately known as "The Mangler." Investigating the laundry and its owner, old Bill Gartley (Englund), is

police detective Johnny Hunton (Levine). With the help of a psychic, Mark (Matmor) Hunton starts to believe that the Mangler may actually be alive, and that Gartley may be using it in some sort of strange occult ritual.

COMMENTARY: Stephen King authored the short story, "The Mangler," while he was a starving young writer making ends meet at an industrial laundry and sweat-shop, no doubt for the equivalent of slave wages. The tale of a malevolent press machine was first published in *Cavalier* in 1972 and then was brought back to prominence in King's 1979 *Night Shift* short story collection.

Tobe Hooper, who did so well with the Stephen King TV movie *Salem's Lot* in 1978, serves as the co-writer and director of the film version and creates one of the weakest Stephen King adaptations ever put to celluloid. And that's a shame because the ideas underlining Stephen King's original story, and indeed, the movie's screenplay are important ones in terms of 1990s history. Like King's similarly-themed (and superior) *Graveyard Shift* (1990), *The Mangler* looks at the human "cost" of the bottom line—profit.

The Mangler arrived in cinemas almost immediately after the signing of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, an initiative sponsored by both President Bush and President Clinton. Many Americans, influenced by Ross Perot's public criticism of the arrangement, feared they were going to lose their jobs as businesses moved overseas for cheap labor. Clinton had won the last presidential election on the mantra "It's the Economy, Stupid," and NAFTA promised to be a make-or-break deal for an America that had just come through a deep recession in the Bush years.

On the other hand, the early 1990s NAFTA and other trade agreements also had impact in terms of globalization. There was a workers' rights movement in the 1990s to prevent sweatshop conditions in international factories. In those foreign settings, children often worked long hours for under minimum wage. The outrage over workers' rights (or lack thereof) reached the pinnacle in the States not long after *The Mangler* premiered when TV host Kathie Lee Gifford's line of clothes for Wal Mart, called "Kathie Lee" came under examination as the product of sweatshop conditions.

Recession, free trade, unions and workers rights: the movie version of *The Mangler* seemed perfectly positioned in the mid-nineties to exploit this topic and the fears surrounding it. And, in terms of art direction, the movie does function competently as a kind of industrial nightmare. As the movie commences, Hooper's camera pans across the grimy, antiquated and dangerous gears and motor of the Mangler

device. To use a buzzword, it's not exactly "user friendly."

The laundry itself is a worker's nightmare. Sweat, steam and sheets co-mingle in the misery of a vast factory building obviously meant to evoke turn-of-the-century American sweatshops. This visualization of worker's hell even works in light of the film's characterization and plot: Gartley is an ancient old robber baron type of the early 20th century but has prolonged his existence in to the 1990s, literally upon the blood and sweat of his workers. He is a vampire of a different order, in a sense.

Unfortunately, *The Mangler* itself was "outsourced" to a place where movies could be produced more cheaply—South Africa—and perhaps that accounts for the fact that many aspects of the film seem off; it's like a foreign film attempting to look and sound authentically American.

Some of the concepts, like a demonically possessed refrigerator, also seem laughable. Ted Levine is an interesting actor, no doubt, but he seems miscast as the film's dedicated hero. He's a bit too surly, a bit too down-in-the-mouth to serve as the identification point for the audience.

The Mangler itself, though beautiful, has a limited range for most of the film. If people are afraid of it, they should either not report to work, or not go near the bloody thing. Of course, in defense of the film, this is exactly the debate about workers' rights. Many workers have no choice but to work on dangerous machinery for long hours: they are poor and desperate and "just leaving" isn't an option. Still, a stationary laundry machine is a distinctly quirky choice for a boogeyman, and the film doesn't always make the idea work.

The Mangler was a gigantic bomb when released in theaters, and the mere mention of it today often draws shivers of horror from genre enthusiasts. With the colossal teaming of King, Hooper and Englund, plus a fertile real-world context to explore, *The Mangler* could have really cleaned-up.

Instead, it's just a decade's dirty laundry.

Outbreak * * *

Critical Reception

"The director is strong on setups, and the hunt for the virus is tense. He makes the mistake of revealing the villains right away; Sutherland and Freeman appear in a suspense-wasting flashback. But Petersen makes us forget that handicap with exciting, if absurd, helicopter chases. (Copters touch rotors in midair and fly on, unaffected!)"—Lawrence Toppmann, *The Charlotte Observer*, "Tense Outbreak has Ailing Plot," March 10, 1995

Cast and Crew

CAST: Dustin Hoffman (Dr. Sam Daniels); Rene Russo (Dr. Robbie Keough); Kevin Spacey (Casey); Morgan Freeman (General Billy Ford); Cuba Gooding, Jr. (Saul); Patrick Dempsey (Jimbo Scott); Donald Sutherland (McClintock); Zakes Mokae (Dr. Benjamin Iwabi); Malick Bowens (Dr. Raswani); Susan Lee Hoffman (D. Lisa Aronson); Lance Kerwin (American Mercenary); J.T. Walsh (Vice President of the United States).

CREW: Warner Bros. Presents an Arnold Kopelson production in association with Push Productions, a Wolfgang Peterson Film. *Casting:* Jane Jenkins, Janet Hirshenson. *Music:* James Newton Howard. *Film Editors:* Neil Travis, William Hoy, Lynzee Kingman. *Production Designer:* William Sandell. *Director of Photography:* Michael Ballhaus. *Executive Producer:* Anne Kopelson, Duncan Henderson. *Written by:* Laurence Dworet and Robert Ray Pool. *Produced by:* Arnold Kopelson, Wolfgang Peterson, Gail Katz. *Directed by:* Wolfgang Peterson. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 127 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A scientist named Dr. Sam Daniels (Hoffman) is sent to Zaire to investigate the outbreak of hemorrhagic fever there. Containment appears probable until the carrier of the disease—a monkey—is captured and illegally smuggled into the United States. Jimbo Scott (Dempsey) breaks the monkey out of an experimental warehouse in the western U.S. and takes it to a pet shop in the small

town of Cedar Creek. Before long, both Jimbo and the populace of Cedar Creek begin to experience the horrifying symptoms of Ebola. The U.S. military establishes a quarantine zone around the town and sends in Daniels, his estranged wife (now head of the CDC), Robbie (Russo), and a medical team to attempt to find a cure for the disease. A headstrong general, McClintock (Sutherland), wants to nuke the town, even as Sam and a rogue army helicopter pilot (Gooding Jr.) go in search of the monkey, who could be the key to unlocking a cure.

COMMENTARY: In 1994, Richard Preston's non-fiction book *The Hot Zone* became a *New York Times* #1 best-seller. More than that, the "terrifying true story" captured the imagination—and fears—of America at large. The novel explored, in detail, an outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus in a monkey storage facility called Hazelton Laboratories in Reston, Virginia, during the year 1989.

The so-called Reston Ebolavirus occurred in crab-eating Macaques imported from the Philippines, and—blessedly—the fatal disease never crossed from the monkeys to human beings. But the CDC was sent in to investigate the situation, and the prominence of the case made plain the danger of Ebola and other lethal viruses.

Based on his 1992 *New Yorker* story, "Crisis in the Hot Zone," Preston's *The Hot Zone* included information not just about the outbreak in Virginia, but also about occasions in which unfortunate people, usually hikers, were infected with the disease in Africa "in the shadow of Mount Elgon."

The last chapter of Preston's book featured the author exploring the cave where Ebola was believed to have been first pinpointed, as well as visiting the lab building in Reston where the 1989 outbreak occurred and was contained. The building itself was demolished in 1995.

Among other terrors, *The Hot Zone* described, in often-nauseating detail, the effects of hemorrhagic fever, or Ebola, on the human body. The following account of the disease's final phase, sometimes called "crashing," is no fiction, remember: You want horror? This was horror at its most disturbing and realistic.



Bio-hazard suits are the attire of 1990s horror. In *Outbreak* (1995), Sam Daniels (Dustin Hoffman) and wife Roberta Keough (Rene Russo) don the suits.



Infection! Hemorrhagic fever strikes in *Outbreak*, starring Dustin Hoffman and Rene Russo.

He loses consciousness and pitches forward onto the floor. The

only sound is a choking in his throat as he continues to vomit blood and black matter while unconscious. Then comes a sound like a bed sheet being torn in half, which is the sound of his bowels opening and venting blood from the anus. The blood is mixed with intestinal lining. He has sloughed his gut. The lining of his intestines have come off and are being expelled along with huge amounts of blood.⁵⁴

All of a sudden, the 1990s had itself a new boogeyman, a microscopic invader that would cause catastrophic injury and death on a scale that Hannibal Lecter and Freddy Krueger couldn't even imagine. Hollywood took note, and it wasn't long before a movie about Ebola and killer viruses was made, titled *Outbreak*.

This film by director Wolfgang Peterson charts the arrival in the United States (via a monkey carrier) of a virulent strain of hemorrhagic fever, the fictional "Motaba" variant of Ebola. The disease takes hold in a Norman Rockwell-ish California town called Cedar Creek and begins killing Americans right and left in much the same manner described in the above passage. The sick bleed out of their eyes. Their organs become jelly, liquefied. They cough up blood.

It's not for the weak-of-stomach, that's for certain.

The most sadistic and effective scene in *Outbreak* depicts the spread of the airborne disease particles through a crowded movie theater auditorium. A person seated in one row coughs, thus releasing the disease particles, and they hover about— *visible*— before flying into another person's mouth.

If *Jaws* (1975) kept swimmers out of the water during the summer and *Psycho* (1960) made people fear taking a shower, this sequence in *Outbreak* is enough to turn people off multiplexes for a couple decades. The disturbing sequence serves two masters, and brilliantly so.

In the first case, it dramatizes in visual fashion how one infected person can unwittingly infect dozens of other people by the most innocuous of actions, a cough.

And secondly, the scene brings the horror directly to the audience watching the film. They are sitting in a movie theater too, after all, watching this spread of disease occur.

Who's that guy coughing in the front row?

Outbreak also goes to great lengths to show the level of care and attention required of scientists and physicians coping with such a disease. They must wear hermetically-sealed hazmat suits (which

promptly became the fashion *du jour* of 1990s horror movies after Peterson's film), maintain rigorous standards of specimen care and preparation, and the slightest breach of protocol could result in death, as the scientist played by Kevin Spacey nearly learns in the film.

Outbreak also outlines the draconian procedures the government would have usher in to prevent a disease like the Motaba virus from spreading beyond one population center. Martial law is established in the film, military curfews are executed and any vehicles attempting to leave the hot zone are fired on by helicopters or tanks. The government, in fact, plans to use a non-nuclear, fuel-air bomb to destroy the entire city to prevent any possibility of the contagion reaching populations beyond scenic, geographically-isolated Cedar Creek.

The film includes a discussion of the 1918 in-fluenza for good measure, thus providing a reallife context for the specter of mass death by disease. Since *Outbreak*, we've had SARS and Swine Flu (or H1N1), so this boogeyman is one that is not going away any time soon, and continues to raise alarms worldwide, even in the 21st century. In good 1990s fashion, however, *Outbreak* also suggests a military conspiracy, namely that the Army has been experimenting with Motaba since 1967 and already may have a secret cure for the disease.

For its first hour or so, *Outbreak* is a terrifying realistic and believable viewing experience. The film takes the viewers to a village in Africa suffering from Ebola and which ultimately gets nuked. Then it shows the progress of the disease in America, and there is an image of body bags stacked floor-to-ceiling in a Cedar Creek barn. A local high school and sports field are transformed into a vast camp for the sick and dying, and a baseball cage is seen inside a wider-containment fence.

The movie provides startling statistics about the spread of the disease too. If not successfully contained, the entire continental United States could be infected in just forty-eight hours.

Put simply, this is a vision of apocalypse, of the end of human life on Earth. And again, it's due to something so small it can't be detected by the naked eye.

In its second hour, *Outbreak* starts to pull its punches. Two lead characters (played by Rene Russo and Kevin Spacey) miraculously survive their encounters with the deadly disease, and the epidemic is finally put down. The movie resorts to mock heroics and a climactic helicopter chase featuring Cuba Gooding, Jr., and Dustin Hoffman.

At this point, it is clear that Hollywood bullshit has infected the

movie more potently than Ebola, and there's even one absolutely ridiculous moment when Hoffman's brilliant scientist proves utterly unprofessional and foolish. While treating his infected wife (Russo), Daniels rips off his hazmat helmet. It's a big gamble, especially if his antibody serum didn't work as intended. And since he's the point-man on the cure, he would have imperiled hundreds of sick people had he died.

Despite these very real flaws, the first hour of *Outbreak* is as grim and scary as any movie made in the 1990s, and Dustin Hoffman gives an impassioned, believable (and scared-silly) performance here.

Frankly, the movie would merit three stars out of four, just for Hoffman's performance and the movie-theater Ebola infection scene, which is a gruesome, trademark moment in horror movies from the Age of Clinton.

The Prophecy * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christopher Walken (Gabriel); Elias Koteas (Thomas Daggett); Virginia Madsen (Katherine); Eric Stoltz (Simon); Adam Goldberg (Jerry); Steve Hytner (Joseph); J.C. Quinn (Burrows); Amanda Plummer (Rachel); Viggo Mortensen (Lucifer); Emma Shenah (Grandmother); Albert Nelson (Grey Horse); Emily Conforto (Sandra); Sandra Lafferty (Madge); Christine Holmes (Allison).

CREW: Dimension Films and First Look Pictures Present a Neo Motion Pictures Production, a Gregory Widen Film. *Costume Designer:* Dana Alyyson. *Production Designer:* Clark Hunter. *Music:* David C. Williams. *Film Editor:* Sonny Baskin. *Director of Photography:* Bruce Douglas Johnson, Richard Clabaugh. *Executive Producers:* W.K. Border, Don Phillips. *Produced by:* Joel Soisson. *Written and directed by:* Gregory Widen. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A priest-turned-cop, Thomas Daggett (Koteas), is confronted by an angel (Stoltz) who tells him of a second war in Heaven. This time, the conflict is a rebellion prosecuted by the archangel Gabriel (Walken), and the sticking point is man's prominence in God's plan. Daggett joins forces with a school-teacher named Katherine (Madsen) to protect a little Native American girl

from Gabriel who is aware that Gabriel seeks the treasure she hides inside. Meanwhile, Lucifer (Mortensen) is not too happy to learn of Gabriel's rebellion, and inserts himself into the battle too.

COMMENTARY: With the Millennium fast approaching, horror films of the 1990s began to focus in earnest on apocalyptic prophecies and possibilities. *The Runestone* (1992) meditated on Ragnarok, a Norse version of apocalypse. Films such as *The Arrival* (1996) and *The X-Files: Fight the Future* (1998) depicted a conspiracy paving the way for an inevitable alien invasion.

In book stores, the *Left Behind* novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, first released on New Year's Eve, 1995, focused on the Christian mythology of apocalypse: the Rapture and End Times. Over sixty million copies of the *Left Behind* series were ultimately sold.

In cinemas, the 1995 film *The Prophecy* also involves Christian-styled horror, in particular, a second war in Heaven that has been occurring for something like eighteen centuries. The primary combatants are angels, but they are not the cuddly, winged cherubim of popular presentation.

Rather, these angels have sightless blackeyes, are hermaphroditic, and, presaging *The Matrix* (1999), adorn themselves mostly in long trench-coats. They are more like rival gangsters than servants of the divine.

And some of *The Prophecy's* most potent imagery involves quick, almost impressionistic flashes of the war plains of Heaven. Thousands of the winged creatures are dead; impaled on spikes after vicious combat.

The cause of this second heavenly war is God's undying love of mankind. One rebellious group of angels, led by Gabriel (Christopher Walken in leather pants), is angry that God seems to favor these earthbound "monkeys" over Gabriel's kind.

Straddling the middle of the battleground is Lucifer, played by Viggo Mortensen. He is none too happy to see Gabriel taking on his insurrectionist act. And besides, he doesn't want to have to compete with Gabriel for souls or over a second Hell for mankind if he loses.

Rather disappointingly, *The Prophecy's* narrative takes the shape of—surprise—a standard police procedural, as detective Thomas Daggett (Koteas) becomes involved in a battle of the angels here on Earth, in Chimney Rock, Arizona. Both sides in the war seek a specific human, a "black soul" who is capable of tremendous destruction.

Daggett, a lapsed man of faith (and nearly a priest), follows the clues with the help of local music teacher, Katherine, played by Virginia Madsen. There are also the requisite scenes with a coroner conducting an autopsy of an angel and Daggett's familiar history as a "tragic hero," a man who has lost his faith because God "showed him too much."

Despite the underwhelming procedural structure of *The Prophecy*, the film entertains because of Christopher Walken's bizarre and fun portrayal of the angelic/demonic Gabriel. Walken plays the character almost as a jilted, jealous lover. He can't stand that God loves Man more than he loves the angels, and wants to make things "the way they were" before God created Man. Gabriel even notes, again like an estranged lover, that God "doesn't talk to him anymore." That he can't hear him.

The Prophecy gives Gabriel some wordy, colorful speeches as this swaggering angel, and Walken runs with the colorful material, finding humor, pathos and malevolence in one fearsome package.

The horror at the heart of *The Prophecy*, of course, is spiritual. Despite our belief to the contrary, Man's world is out of his control ... merely a battlefield for higher forces. And if Gabriel wins the conflict, we "talking monkeys" have no future at all. The film gets some currency from the fact that, according to Christian belief, God sees all, but doesn't always act on what he knows. Would the Lord act to save us? Can God lose a war?

In making angels fierce warriors and in presenting Gabriel as the second-coming of the Devil (with a vested interest in destroying humanity), *The Prophecy* plays on our beliefs, and makes us wonder ... what if they are all wrong?

***Relative Fear* * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Darlanne Fluegel (Linda Pratman); Martin Neufeld (Peter Pratman); James Brolin (Detective Atwater); Denise Crosby (Connie Madison); M. Emmet Walsh (Earl Madison); Bruce Dinsmore (Clive/Garrett); Linda Sorensen (Margaret); Jason Blicher (Dennison); Matthew Dupuis (Adam); Vlasta Vrana (Mr. Schulman); Michael Caloz (Manny); Gisele Rousseau (Dr. Hoyer); Jenny Campbell (Paige)

CREW: Allegro Films, Norstar and Westwind present *Relative Fear*. *Casting:* Mary Margiotta, Karen Margiotta, Ginette D'Amico. *Director of Photography:* Rodney Gibbons. *Production Designer:* Patricia Christie. *Film Editor:* Ion Webster. *Music:* Marty Simon. *Executive Producer:* William Webb. *Written by:* Kurt Wimmer. *Produced by:* Tom Berry, Stefan Wodoslawsky. *Directed by:* George Mihalka. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Linda (Fleugel) and Peter Pratman (Neufeld) raise their autistic, mute son, Adam (Dupuis), unaware that the boy is not theirs, but one accidentally switched at birth with their biological son. Adam is actually the son of two criminally-insane psychopaths, Connie Madison (Crosby) and Garrett (Dinsmore). When Adam's mainstreaming in school fails, a tutor, Clive Lovett, arrives in the Pratman home to help the boy progress. Before long, a series of accidental deaths occur around Adam, starting with an obnoxious friend, Manny (Caloz), and then sickly old grandpa, Earl (Walsh). Meanwhile, Linda suspects her own son of being evil, especially after he keeps tuning in to "The National Murder Network" on television...

COMMENTARY: In the early 1990s, Congress was obsessed with the level of violence on American television. In 1992, a Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs discussed TV violence as a contributing factor to childhood aggression.

Similarly, a House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Criminal Justice tackled the same topic that year, learning that incidences of violence on children's weekend, daytime programming was at an all-time high.

By the midpoint of the decade, the U.S. government had recommended further regulation of the TV airwaves through a voluntary ratings system (like the one utilized by the MPAA) and also through direct parental control, utilizing a signal blocking device called a "V-Chip," which was included as part of President Clinton's Telecommunications Act of 1996.

Many horror films of the 1990s, including *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* and *Disturbing Behavior*, took notice both of the increasingly violent, tabloid nature of American television, and of the government's intensive efforts to restrict such imagery, a tact which some people saw as a violation of the First Amendment.

Released in 1995, the Canadian film *Relative Fear* also focused on

the subject of TV's influence on children by featuring an autistic child with a distinct taste for programming on "The National Murder Network," a bloody cable TV channel. Ultimately, the film even makes a case *for child see/child do*, since the TV-watching child, Adam (Dupuis), ultimately takes up a gun to defend his family from a psychopath (actually his biological father).

Otherwise, *Relative Fear* very much fits in with the pattern of the interloper films, featuring: an evil tutor bent only on teaching a child his wayward behavior. Like *The Good Son* (1993), the film also owes some debt to *The Bad Seed* (1954) because virtually every character in the film assumes that the autistic Adam is evil by heritage, since his biological parents were criminally insane.

Unfortunately, *Relative Fear* plays like a bad made-for-TV movie for much of its running time, grinding along on predictable lines. The police procedural sub-plot involving James Brolin is a waste of time, simply offering up another victim for the film's "surprise" killer. The film suffers from its low budget, seemingly set almost entirely in an old house.

Still, two scenes in *Relative Fear* are orchestrated rather effectively. In the first, genre vet Mihalka intercuts Mom's piano audition with scenes of grandpa's nurse tending to little Adam and putting him to bed. The dizzying piano concerto plays as we see Adam watch the "National Murder Channel" and Margaret spanking him for it. Then, Margaret is killed (by an unseen assailant) as a dumbwaiter crushes her. The soundtrack unifies the two scenes, and provides the audience a sense of "when the cat's away, the mice will play."

Also suspenseful is the *de rigueur* "interview with a psychopath" scene in *Relative Fear*. Linda has gone to visit Connie in the Sanitarium, and the warden has instructed her not to cross a yellow line on the floor (so Connie can't reach her).

During the intense interview, Linda breaks that rule to get a peek at a possibly revelatory photograph of Garrett, Adam's biological father. But it's all a ruse and Connie springs her trap. This scene works because the film has set up the rules for the interview (just as Chilton issues the rules in *Silence of the Lambs*), but also because it raises our curiosity. We suspect who Garrett may actually "be" (Clive?), but the photograph would confirm that belief. We want to see it, and Mihalka plays on the audience's desire to glean answers.

Outside these two sequences, *Relative Fear* isn't particularly artful, or scary. Some of the technical touches feel sloppy. In one scene, Linda is plainly seen wearing freshly-applied lipstick during a sequence in which she is supposed to have been sound asleep in bed

for hours. Also, the performances are no more than adequate, with Brolin coming off the worst.

Still, there's something strangely addictive about this little horror movie. You find yourself invested in Adam's story despite the movie's considerable deficits. You want to see how it turns out, even though you can see the film's central surprise coming from a mile away.

Roadflower

(a.k.a. *The Road Killers*) * * 1/2 (DTV)

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christopher Lambert (Jack); Joseph Gordon-Levitt (Ritchie); Craig Sheffer (Cliff); Josh Brolin (Tom); David Arquette (Bobby); Michelle Forbes (Helen); Michael Greene (Sheriff Hodes); Alexondra Lee (Ashlee); Christopher Mc-Donald (Glen); John Pyper-Ferguson (Hauser); Richard Sarafian (Trucker); Adrienne Shelly (Red); Patrick Thomas (Local); Guy Galley (Chicken Farmer); Patricia Murtaugh (Mechanic's Daughter); Kay Cole (Mechanic's Wife); Jo La Due (Mechanic); George Salazar (Milo); Joseph D'Angelo (Marksman).

CREW: Miramax Films Presents in association with John Flock Productions and Silver Lion Films, a Lance Hool/John Flock Production. *Casting:* Terry Liebling. *Costume Designer:* Poppy Cannon-Reese. *Music:* Les Hooper. *Film Editor:* Peck Prior. *Production Designer:* Jonathan Coulson. *Director of Photography:* James L. Carter. *Executive Producers:* Bob and Harvey Weinstein, Paul L. Newman, Conrad Hool. *Written by:* Tedi Sarafian. *Produced by:* John Flock, Lance Hool. *Directed by:* Deran Serafian. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On a family road trip out west, things go awry when young Ritchie (GordonLevitt) is nearly run-over on the highway by a speeding El Dorado. At a nearby diner, Ritchie's dad, Glen (McDonald) angrily confronts the reckless driver of that car, psychotic Cliff (Sheffer), a move which leads to a deadly game of chicken on an isolated stretch of road. Glen dies in the incident, and Cliff and his gang (Brolin, Arquette) abduct his family and attempt to kill his

brother, Jack (Lambert) in the desert. Worse, Cliff takes a keen sexual interest in teenage Ashlee (Lee). Now Jack must rescue his family from Cliff, his equally psychotic brother, Hauser (Pyper-Ferguson), and the other members of his gang.

COMMENTARY: *Roadflower* attempts to be *The Last House on the Left* (1972) or *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) on wheels and it almost succeeds in that task. The movie is often harrowing, commendably fast, and economical in presentation. Occasionally, it crosses the boundaries of good taste in a way any good Wes Craven scholar would recognize and appreciate.

In this road-based film by Deran Serafian, two American "families" go to war with each other ... over nothing, really. On one hand we have the healthy suburban, middle-class family led by siblings Glen (Christopher McDonald) and Jack (Christopher Lambert). And on the other hand is the psychotic, white-trash family, led by brothers Cliff (Craig Sheffer) and Hauser (John Pyper-Ferguson).

At stake is dominance and survival, but also the sexual virtue of an affluent, adolescent girl, Ashlee. In other words one side has something to "lose." This was the case of many middle-aged, white men in 1990s America: they felt they had something to lose, that a new coalition of the left was carving them out of power.

In keeping with 1990s views of adolescents and the teen culture, Ashlee in *Roadflower* is so indulged that she "has her own credit card" according to the film's dialogue. She also plays with fire. In the men's bathroom, she flirts with Cliff, leading him on, and scandalously casts her eyes upon a condom machine. She has lived such a coddled, "safe" existence in modern America she has no idea that Cliff is really, really dangerous ... and can take what he wants.

Playing the equivalent of *Last House's* Junior Stillo (Mark Sheffler) is *Roadflower's* Josh Brolin ... the unwitting killer with a conscience who breaks down into tears over his participation in the blood-curdling crimes.

The bad guys also form a family of sorts, with Sheffer taking on the unlikely roll of father to Tom (Brolin), a role he abdicates when he kills him with a shotgun blast to the head. Also, Cliff breaks up with his girlfriend, Red (Adrienne Shelly), the mother of the group, and there's some resonance of Helen there. Helen is the "mother" in Ashlee's family, but she is not Ashlee's biological mother; just as Red is not biological mom to Tom or the "lost boys" she hangs out with.

Some important scenes in *Road Flower* indicate a willingness to

really go whole hog into transgressive territory, like Craven's landmark 1970s horror films. For instance, little Ritche actually sees his father torched alive in a burning car, following the road game of chicken. The film cuts to Mc-Donald's spasming hand as fire engulfs the vehicle, then to the traumatized little boy wailing in agony.

The movie also makes no bones about Cliff 's sexual intent towards Ashley. He attempts to seduce her, and at one point, his hands glide up the minor's short shorts while she weeps. No, it isn't the rape of *Last House on the Left*, but it's as close as filmmakers would dare come in the 1990s.

Ultimately *Roadflower* doesn't quite feature the aura of grim, inescapable reality that makes *The Last House on the Left* or even *The Hills Have Eyes* such cause célèbre for horror fans. Sheffer usually plays heroes and as the movie's central villain, the performer lacks the grounded sense of reality that made David Hess's Krug such a potent threat in Craven's 1972 film. Furthermore, *Roadflower* quickly descends into action, choosing rather resolutely to avoid the issues it has raised about family dynamics and relationships.

The movie even opens with flourishes of these Craven-esque touches. Helen (Michelle Forbes) is bothered by the sulky Ashlee; Jack is an indulgent father who gives Ashlee too much. Mc-Donald is the prone-to-rage alpha male who, like Bob Carter in Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), can't control his temper and is taken out (by fire) early in the proceedings.

McDonald's Glen is really the cause of all the problems here: he's so arrogant (like Big Bob) that he "rouses" Cliff 's psychosis in the diner, verbally diminishing the sociopath and then throwing water in his face. He doesn't seem to realize how his anger endangers everyone in his family.

Jack is a lot like a Martin Speer's Doug in *The Hills Have Eyes*. He goes from being a civilized man who pampers his well-to-do family to a man of violence and brutality. Ultimately, he saves his daughter by beating the living snot out of Cliff.

But even here, the movie is a little unbelievable. Jack handcuffs Cliff to his car, and then drives his car onto railroad tracks. A moment later, a passing train takes out Cliff and Jack's car in an explosive collision. The fiery explosion reflects Glen's death by fire, but Jack's actions occur in full view of the nearby police. Would police officers really allow a civilian to drag a suspect into the path of an oncoming train? Not only is the suspect's life endangered but those of anyone who happens to be on the train too.

Roadflower seems poorly edited at times, too, as if whole swaths

of the movie have been edited out. Michelle Forbes' character disappears for a good portion of the film, and that seems odd given her powerful introduction and inaugural scenes. But the biggest problem remains crazy Cliff: he seems like a "movie villain" and not a real life villain. He's showy and charismatic and over the top. When the police ask him for his demands to release Ashlee, he says he want a "lifetime supply of Oreo cookies." It's just ... dumb. You can't imagine Krug making such a silly, unsubstantial demand.

Roadflower desires so much to be a horror film about the modern American family, in the vein of *Last House on the Left*, but it doesn't boast the courage or audacity to follow through on that conviction. It isn't nearly as daring or transgressive as it should be. That makes it an interesting genre experiment, but not a whole lot more.

***Rumpelstiltskin* ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kim Johnston Ulrich (Shelly); Tommy Blaze (Max Bergman); Allyce Beasley (Hildy); Max Grodenchik (Rumpelstiltskin); Vera Lockwood (Matilda); Jay Pickett (Russell Stewart); Shannon Augustus (John McCabe); Valeria Wildman (Nedda); Jack McGee (Det. Ben Smith).

CREW: Republic Pictures Presents a Transnational Entertainment/Prescott-Jones Production, a Mark Jones Film. *Casting:* Victoria Burrows. *Music:* Charles Bernstein. *Special Make-up:* Kevin Yagher. *Production Designer:* Ivo Cristante. *Film Editor:* Christopher Holmes. *Director of Photography:* Doug Milsome. *Written by:* Mark Jones and Joe Ruby. *Produced by:* Joe Ruby and Ken Spears. *Directed by:* Mark Jones. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Shelly (Ulrich) is widowed after her cop husband, Russell (Pickett), is shot on the job. Months later, after the birth of her son, John, Shelly goes to a weird antique shop and buys a talisman guaranteed to make her deepest wish come true. After wishing that Russell could lay eyes on his son, just once, Shelly is horrified to learn that she must pay the piper, or in this case, the evil Rumpelstiltskin (Grodenchik). He escapes from the talisman gemstone and wants to steal the soul of young Johnny. Soon help comes from an unlikely

source: an obnoxious tabloid TV star, Max Bergman (Blaze).

COMMENTARY: The tedious *Rumpelstiltskin* proves that *Leprechaun* was no fluke. This followup horror film from director Mark Jones is every bit as laborious, ridiculous and interminable as that inexplicably popular 1993 effort.

Rumpelstiltskin is a film that starts out with some nice storybook flourishes but quickly degenerates into an endless road battle between an *A-Team*— quoting Rumpelstiltskin ("I love it when a plan comes together," he says, quoting George Peppard) and a less-than-heroic protagonist, Max Bergman, who helpfully and accurately describes himself as a "professional asshole."

The elfin villain gives chase in a truck, while Bergman, baby John and imperiled mother, Shelly

(Ulrich), attempt to evade "Uncle Rumble." This chase goes on and on, without suspense, without interest, even without much incident, for a seeming eternity.

Steven Spielberg's *Duel*, this ain't.

The film's best line does, however, arrive during this chase. Surprised, Rumpelstiltskin is run off the road and he shouts, amusingly, "Fucketh me!"

Funny, I was thinking the same thing during this sequence.

Some of the pacing lapses obvious in *Rumpelstiltskin* might have been more easily forgiven if the destination of this journey had been one of interest. Instead, the "evil little man" Rumpelstiltskin is destroyed in utterly obvious fashion when his name is repeatedly recited aloud by the protagonists.

Early on, a character named Hildy (Beasley) actually explained that reciting Rumpelstiltskin's name would kill him, but the movie's protagonists don't avail themselves of this plan until the ninety minute point.



Don't say his name! Max Grodenchik is *Rumpelstiltskin* (1995).

Also, it's impossible to watch the movie and not think that Rumpelstiltskin lived up to his part of the bargain. Shelly wished on a runestone that her dead husband, a cop, could see his child alive and well just once. The cop even tells his wife "You're not dreaming Shelly, I'm real. Your wish came true." Rumpelstiltskin delivers on that promise and wants to be paid with the currency of his preference, which just happens to be a cute little baby...

I'm as big a fan of Max Grodenchik as the next guy, but frankly he's too talented to be stuck in the role of low-rent Warwick Davis. Grodenchik is good with his one liners and menacing enough as a grim fairy tale villain but is given nothing by way of support from the cast, the story or the presentation of the film.

And to top it all off, *Rumpelstiltskin* has the gall to end with a blatant set-up for a sequel which—saints preserve us—never came.

Of this "fairy tale come alive from the past," I can say only, in the lingo of the film, "don't bust my hump."

Critical Reception

"With the help of Khondji and Rob Bottin's animatronics, Fincher has succeeded remarkably well in recreating a strong echo of the genius of such teams as Jacque Tourneur and Nick Musaraca, who in the 1950s collaborated on such masterpieces as *Out of the Past* and *I Walked with a Zombie*, films characterized by intelligent scripts, fine acting and a distinctive black-and-white look."—Edward Summer, *Films in Review*, January–February 1996, page 66

"Fincher infects every scene with his infernal fussing. The main characters are invariably drenched in picturesque rain and shot with cockeyed camera angles. Even a potentially thrilling chase scene is undermined by Fincher's penchant for sending pigeons fluttering toward the camera or viewing the principals from either high above or far below the action."—Michael Medved, *New York Post*, September 22, 1995, page 39

"One of the most visceral and frightening serial killer movies ever made.... From its jerky opening credits to the horrifying twist ending, *Se7en*, directed by David Fincher, leads viewers further into a murky abyss, ratcheting up the tension to an almost unbearable level."—S.T. Joshi, *Icons of Horror and the Supernatural: An Encyclopedia of Our Worst Nightmares*, Greenwood Press, 2007, page 501

"... *Se7en*— quite beautiful and piercing—is one of the most truly sadistic works the cinema has produced. It's very achievement is disgusting."—David Thomson, *Have You Seen?* Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, page 765

"... David Fincher's rhapsodically gloomy *Se7en* (1995) is a brilliant variation on the 'killer with a system' formula, in which a fiendish psychopath is committing killings based on the seven deadly sins...."—Maitland McDonagh, *Movie Lust*, Sasquatch Books, 2006, page 124

"That David Fincher was allowed to make this film after the box-office fiasco that was *Alien3* says at least one thing—Hollywood sometimes does give second chances to the worthy, and Fincher did a very good job with this film that really, really wants to push the same buttons as *Silence of the Lambs*. It's not as good a film as *Silence of the Lambs* but there is much to recommend it. Kevin Spacey spent this decade as the 'mystery guy' in films (was I the only person who 'Suspected' him because I assumed Kevin Spacey would only be in *The Usual Suspects* if he WAS the man?). The tone of *Se7en* morphed eventually into the *Saw* films (they seem almost siblings). Fine score by Howard Shore, some gruesome effects, and if nothing more, joins *The Silence of the Lambs* in the subgenre of 'charismatic serial killer geniuses.'"—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"We'd never have *Saw* if it was not for this incredible film—whether that's a good thing or not is up to you. David Fincher creates a flawless atmosphere of doom, Morgan Freeman is exceptional as a cynical cop, and Kevin Spacey's turn as serial killer John Doe is literally star-making. Both visually stunning and psychologically harrowing."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Brad Pitt (Detective David Mills); Morgan Freeman (Detective Somerset); Kevin Spacey (John Doe); Gwyneth Paltrow (Tracy); Richard Roundtree (Martin Talbot); R. Lee Ermey (Police Captain); John C. McGinley (California); Julie Araskog (Mrs. Gould); Mark Boone Junior (Greasy F.B.I. Man); Leland Orser (Crazed Man in Massage Parlor); Emily Wagner (Detective Sara); Martin Serene (Wild Bill); Cat Mueller (Lust); Bob Mack (Gluttony); Gene Borkan (Greed).

CREW: New Line Cinema presents an Arnold Kopelson production, a film by David Fincher. *CASTING:* David Hopkins, Suzanne Smith, Kerry Borden. *MUSIC:* Howard Shore. *COSTUME DESIGNER:* Michael Kaplan. *FILM EDITOR:* Richard Francis-Bruce. *PRODUCTION DESIGNER:* Arthur May. *DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:* Darius Khondji. *CO-PRODUCERS:* Stephen Brown, Nana Greenwald. *EXECUTIVE PRODUCER:* Giannia Nunnari, Dan Kolsrod, Anne Kopelson. *WRITTEN BY:* Andrew Kevin Walker. *PRODUCED BY:* Arnold Kopelson, Phyllis Carlyle. *DIRECTED BY:* David Fincher. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 127 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On the eve of his retirement, big city detective Somerset (Freeman) teams up with a rookie transfer from upstate, David Mills (Pitt). Together, this unlikely duo attempts to solve a series of horrifying serial killings that relate to the seven deadly sins: sloth, wrath, pride, lust, gluttony and envy. Meanwhile, Somerset befriends Tracy (Paltrow), David's lonely wife, a woman who "hates the city" and life there.

COMMENTARY: *Se7en* is one of the grimmest, most horrifying movies ever made ... period. It is a horror film without hope regarding the human condition, but also a film of extraordinary craft and power. *Se7en* ends with a powerful indictment of the civilization we have made in the 20th century and even an argument for the continued attempt to make the world a better place. Somerset, played beautifully (if sadly) by Morgan Freeman, quotes writer Ernest Hemingway: "The world is a fine place and worth fighting for."

Then Somerset pauses and adds this caveat. "I agree with the second part..."

To showcase the fact that the world is not such a fine place, director David Fincher and his cinematographer, Darius Khondji, carefully create a rotting and timeless metropolis in *Se7en* as backdrop to the film's action. It is a world of constant rainfall, bars on windows, sickly green medical examination rooms, and decaying infrastructure.

This world is not colorful in the traditional sense, but steely and cold in its complexion, decisively lacking warmth and humanity. The camera perpetually showcases grime, chipped paint, and garbage.

Imaginatively, however, this cinematic city seems to exist outside of any particular time period between 1960 and 1995—as if it has always been this way and always shall remain this way. For instance, very few computers are seen in the film. Even the library doesn't have computers; the detectives must rely on books. Similarly, the camera catches glimpses of an electric typewriter on Somerset's desk. At home, he has a record player, not a CD player.

Even the dialogue reflects this idea of a timeless city. "It's the way it has always been," R. Lee Ermey's police captain notes at one point, somewhat cryptically.

There's no comfort to be found anywhere in this urban environment. Even the Mills' cramped apartment doesn't appear designed for human beings: a subway periodically shakes and rattles the abode, making it virtually unlivable.



Detective Somerset (Morgan Freeman) discusses serial killers and the seven deadly sins in David Fincher's *Se7en* (1995).

The subtextual idea here is that this city is actually Hell on Earth, a reflection of Dante's *Inferno* and its "city of pain," and "lost people."⁵⁵ This is a highly appropriate given the fact that Somerset finds that the key to uncovering John Doe's crimes has something to do with Dante and his literary work.

Why position these characters and this story in a kind of generic, rotting 20th century city? The answer is simple: to suggest that the human animal doesn't change, even across the decades. The newspapers featured in *Se7en* carry no identifying banner, but all the headlines scream bloody murder, an unending litany of sin and ugliness. The idea is that man is a fallen creature in this city of pain. Though a monster, the film's killer, John Doe, subscribes to this belief himself. He believes he must make people aware of their bad behavior and thus attacks people in the manner of their worst sins.

Se7en delves into hellish, Boschian crime scenes. In one, an obese man has been fed until his stomach literally exploded. He represents gluttony. Another murder involves an excised "pound of flesh" to embody the sin of greed. Sloth is one of the most disturbing of the sins personified by city-goers and "staged" by John Doe: a man is strapped to a bed, emaciated and left for dead, absolutely corpse-like. He has swallowed his own tongue. And when this poor soul comes briefly to life, *Se7en* descends into utter, sickening terror.

You feel the uneasiness, the queasiness, in your guts.

The one ray of light in the film is sweet Tracy, David's wife, played by Gwyneth Paltrow. She has moved to the city to support David's career, though she finds the conditions there are "horrible." She is pregnant with the couple's first child, though she has not yet confided in David about this. In other words, bound in this beautiful, loyal character are the ideals of loyalty, commitment and belief in the future, sharp contrasts to the seven deadly sins.

And so, naturally, the movie ends with Tracy's murder and the desecration, even, of her body, the temple which carried the future. In order to make a point about pride and wrath (Mills' crimes), the killer John Doe kills Tracy and delivers her severed head—in a brown box—to David.

Characters die all the time in horror movies, but this demise is devastating. It suggests an end to all the things humanity holds dear: an end to the ideals Tracy embodied so powerfully. Thus *Se7en's* conclusion is absolutely shattering, absolutely black. The movie ends on an utterly uncompromising and bleak note.

This finale is a clear embodiment of Fincher's stated belief that movies "should scar," should leave indelible trauma on the psyches of the viewers. Even Fincher's *Alien*³ had an out, a heroic end for Ripley, one that saved the universe even if she didn't live to see it, plus the ameliorative voiceover narration that allowed audiences time to mourn the character.

Se7en holds out no such hope. It scars, and it scars deeply. It is unrelenting.

In a powerful sense, *Se7en* projects the ultimate disposition of a sensational, tabloid culture, a destination, perhaps, where many Americans in the 1990s felt the country was bound. Here, the noise of the culture, the noise of the sensational, drowns out the good, the positive, the hopeful. "Wanting people to listen, you can't just tap them on the shoulder. You have to hit them with a hammer," Joe Doe suggests, by way of explanation for his horrible crimes. "We see a deadly sin on every street corner ... because it's trivial, common, we tolerate it."

Why is it common? Because it was the flavor of the week on *The Jenny Jones Show*, perhaps.

What becomes of a culture bathed in sensationalism as a 24-hour-a-day diet? Apathy, the film suggests. David says he can't stand apathy, that he can't live in a world where apathy is considered a virtue.

By contrast, Somerset, the seasoned veteran, claims to understand apathy. "Apathy is the solution. I mean, it's easier to lose yourself in drugs than it is to cope with life. It's easier to steal what you want than it is to earn it. It's easier to beat a child than it is to raise it. Hell, love costs: it takes effort and work."

Se7en looks at a world where it fears the effort isn't being made anymore—in a city of the damned where the work isn't being done. What it projects is the rise of a mad prophet who will galvanize the attention of the culture, and, if he is successful, change it.

The irony of this is that there is so much sensationalism and tabloid journalism in 1990s America that John Doe's disgusting crimes in *Se7en* would hardly be more than a day or two worth of stories at best. Then it would be time to move on to the next atrocity, the next attentiongrabber.

After *The Silence of the Lambs* re-invented the police procedural/serial killer film for the 1990s, no one had any right to expect another blazingly original masterpiece of the form to come down the pike anytime soon. Yet that's precisely what occurs with *Se7en*.

Although it generically deals in all the tropes of the serial killer paradigm, including the wrongheaded superior, the killer with seemingly magical cunning, the police procedural partners, etc., it also re-invents the form by setting it in a fallen, blighted urban world. John Doe isn't the only monster in *Se7en*. The city is the monster. The world we've built is the monster.

That's a pretty bold statement for any movie to make, and *Se7en* has the courage of its blackest, angriest convictions. It's not a "fun" movie.

Actually, it's hardly a mainstream one. Instead, *Se7en* is the ninth level of Hell brought to your movie screen. It tells its audience the world is not such a fine place.

Do something about it.

***Sleepstalker: The Sandman's Last Rites* * 1/2**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jay Underwood (Griffin); Kathryn Morris (Megan); William Lucking (Detective Worth); Kathleen McMartin (Dana); A.J.

Glassman (Kenny); Marc McClure (Dad); Caryn Richman (Mom); Michael D. Roberts (The Preacher); Michael Harris (The Sandman); Ken Foree (Detective Rolands); Angela Ashley (Cheryl); Barry Lynch (Pierson); Peter Mark Vasquez (Dog Sanchez); Lenore Van Camp (Julia); Christopher Boyer (Detective Garcia); Joey Andrews (Young Sandman); Michael Faella (Sandman's Father).

CREW: Prism Pictures Presents an Intrazone, Luigi Gingolani Production of a Turi Meyer Film. *Casting:* Mark Tillman, Russell Gray. *Costume Designer:* Julie Rae Engelsman. *Production Designer:* Arlan Jay Vetter. *Digital Effects:* Intrazone Interactive, Ltd., Christ Walker. *Special Make-up Effects:* Gary J. Tunnicliffe, Image Animation International. *Music:* Jim Manzie. *Film Editor:* Fred Wardell. *Director of Photography:* Michael G. Wojciechowski. *Line Producer:* Shelly Strong. *Executive Producers:* Barry Collier, Harmon Kaslow. *Co-Producers:* Al Septien, Brian Patrick O'Toole. *Written by:* Al Septien, Turi Meyer. *Produced by:* Luigi Gingolani. *Directed by:* Turi Meyer. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: As a little boy, Griffin (Underwood) was the sole survivor of a serial killer's reign of terror. Seventeen years later, the Sandman (Harris) is executed in prison for his crimes, but Griffin's suffering has just begun. The killer—now a supernatural entity—stalks Griffin, his roommate, Kenny (Glassman), and his girlfriend, Megan (Morris). As Griffin learns more about the monster who murdered his parents (Richman, McClure), he realizes that he and the Sandman share a familial bond.

COMMENTARY: Another supernaturally-driven serial killer menaces society in *Sleepstalker: The Sandman's Last Rites*. It's another tired police procedural and, tangentially, a grim fairy tale, too, since the serial killer here, played well by Michael Harris, is actually the mythical Sandman (see also 1996's similar-themed *Sandman*).

Some aspects of this film are laughably bad. The detective from the opening "crime in the past" scene, for instance, appears not to have aged a day in seventeen years when he re-appears in the film's present.

And what is the humor-minded viewer to make about dialogue that indicates the Sandman has developed his "powers from the bowels of the Earth."

From its bowels?

Sleepstalker: The Sandman's Last Rites proves more ingenious in the visual depiction of the Sandman. The villain can actually change form into sand, and so the audiences sees this Boogeyman shape-shifting and pouring through a door's keyhole, traveling down a vent shaft and a chimney. The movie also depicts sand eating a friendly gang leader's face right down to the bone in one startling moment.

And, in one decent (for the 1990s) CGI shot, the Sandman's entire corporeal, human form rises from a pile of sand. All these moments are handled with invention and skill, and sometimes involve reverse photography.

Sleepstalker concerns the cycle of abuse. The serial killer is actually half-brother of the film's protagonist, Griffin (Jay Underwood). Both men were abused by a drunken father years earlier, and the Sandman killed their old man with a shard of broken glass, freeing Griffin from further injury.

But now, as the Sandman's only connection to the mortal world, Griffin must die, and his brother is a worse monster than even their dead father. There's definitely something here about violence begetting violence, about abuse generating only further abuse. It just feels old hat, and director Turi Meyer fails to excavate real pathos from the connection between victim and prey.

I'm a longtime admirer of Michael Harris, who brings menace to his role as *The Sandman*. He starred in the underwhelming UPN 1997 series, *The Burning Zone*, basically on a weekly basis, as the Machiavellian Dr. Cassian. So successful was Harris on that program that he went from being a supporting character to the series lead in a span of one season. In fact, Harris sort of single-handedly rescued that *X-Files* rip-off from obscurity, playing the morally ambiguous character with great skill and charisma.

One wishes he had the opportunity to do the same for *Sleepstalker*.

***Sorceress* * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Julie Strain (Erica); Linda Blair (Amelia); Edward Albert (Howard); Larry Poindexter (Larry); Rochelle Swanson (Carol); Kristina Ducati (Kathy); Michael Parks (Stan); William Marshall (John

Geiger); Lenny Juliano (Don); Toni Naples (Maria); Antonia Dorian (Trisha); Fred Olen Ray (Bill Carson).

CREW: Triboro Entertainment Presents a Jim Wynorski Film. *Director of Photography:* Gary Graver. *Film Editor:* Peter Miller. *Music:* Chuck Cirino, Darryl Way. *Written by:* Mark Thomas McGee. *Executive Producer:* Toni Naples. *Produced by:* Fred Olen Ray. *Directed by:* Jim Wynorski. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Witchcraft is the order of the day as suburban housewives Amelia (Blair) and Erica (Strain) use the black arts against each other in hopes of advancing the careers of their respective husbands at a prominent law firm. After failing to knock off Amelia's husband, Howard (Albert), Erica is undone by Amelia and is believed to be dead. Her husband, Larry (Poindexter), mourns briefly, and then quickly starts up a relationship with Carol (Swanson), who is wearing a gem-stone that permits Amelia to manipulate her. Amelia hopes to destroy Larry by turning Carol into the very vision of the murdered Erica.

COMMENTARY: *Sorceress* is an erotic horror movie, which is a polite euphemism for soft porn. It features a heavy emphasis on eroticism (which is a euphemism for nudity) and only a light flavoring of supernatural horror (meaning, actually, none at all).

In other words, *Sorceress* is prurient latenight Cinemax (Skinemax?) fare, but features nothing to excite the horror enthusiast beyond abundant female pulchritude. The film involves

competitive witchcraft in modern, middle-class suburbia, but this is no *Jack's Wife* (1972).

In other words, *Sorceress* is neither an examination of witchcraft nor of American suburbia, just an excuse for big-breasted and mostly artificially-enhanced women to disrobe and enthusiastically enact simulated threesomes, orgies, same-sex couplings and the like. It's indeed a bit of a shock to see genre greats Linda Blair, Edward Albert, Jr., and William Marshall lend their talents to such a lascivious, unworthy enterprise, but then, they seem to be acting in another movie altogether. They get to voice lots of plot exposition, while the nubile Strain, Swanson and Ducati engage in other, more ... uh ... athletic activities.

Sorceress ends with the lousy "it was all a dream" cliché, which makes you wonder about the point of the narrative. But then, of

course, you remember that this kind of movie isn't about the narrative. It's about two letters in the alphabet. T. and A. On those grounds, the film is certainly successful. If you're in the mood, I guess, it'll get you through the night. But screened in the cold light of day and viewed by any even modest critical standard, *Sorceress* is a really terrible movie.

Frankly, a mainstream movie such as *Species* (1995), featuring a fetching, star-making performance by Natasha Henstridge, is a whole lot sexier than anything you'll find in *Sorceress*. *Species* understands that sex isn't just about naked bodies bouncing and colliding, but about personality, brains, and attitude. By comparison, *Sorceress* is pretty mechanical-seeming and soul-deadening.

Species * * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"Part science fiction and part high-school fantasy, the direction and writing are very efficient, but lack the necessary humour that a Joe Dante, or the satire a John Carpenter could have brought to the proceedings."—Yoram Allon, Dell Cullen, Hannah Patterson, *Contemporary North American Film Directors: A Wallflower Critical Guide*, Wallflower Press, 2005, page 144

"... good, sexy fun."—John L. Flynn, *War of the Worlds: From Wells to Spielberg*, Galactic Books, 2005, page 144

"A fine cast that includes Ben Kingsley, Forest Whitaker, Michael Madsen and Alfred Molina still doesn't quite make this worth watching. Natasha Henstridge does make quite a splash as the deadly Sil, with an interesting character design by *Alien* art director H.R. Giger."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Ben Kingsley (Xavier Fitch); Michael Madsen (Preston Lennox); Alfred Molina (Arden); Forest Whitaker (Dan Smithson); Marg Helgenberger (Dr. Laura Baker); Whip Hubley (John Carey); Michelle Williams (Young Sil); Natasha Henstridge (Sil); Jordan Lund

(Aid);

CREW: MGM Presents a Frank Mancuso Production, a Ronald Donaldson Film. *Casting:* Amanda Mackey, Cathy Sandrich. *Sil Design by:* H.G. Giger. *Special Make-up:* Steve Johnson. *Executive Producer:* David Streit. *Music:* Christopher Young. *Costume Designer:* Joe I. Tompkin. *Visual Effects Designer:* Richard Edlund. *Film Editor:* Conrad Buff. *Production Designer:* John Muto. *Director of Photography:* Andrej Barkowiak. *Written by:* Dennis Feldman. *Produced by:* Frank Mancuso, Dennis Feldman. *Directed by:* Roger Donaldson. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 108 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A little girl named Sil (Williams)—the product of extra-terrestrial genetic engineering—escapes from a high security facility, eludes pursuit, and boards a train. There she mutates and develops into a gorgeous, adult woman (Henstridge). Arriving in Los Angeles, her immediately biological need is to mate ... a sexual joining that could result in the destruction of the human race. Hot on Sil's trail is a government-sanctioned pursuit team consisting of project leader Xavier Fitch (Kingsley), "problem solver" Preston Lennox (Madsen), biologist Laura Baker (Helgenberger), empath Dan Smithson (Whitaker) and sociologist Arden (Molina). After a few failed attempts, Sil manages to mate, and quickly carries her alien spawn to term...

COMMENTARY: By the time that *Species* (1995) rolled around at the mid-point of the decade, horror fans were so deprived of high-quality, scary entertainment that the Roger Donaldson alien, "science run amok" blockbuster looked like something approximating manna from Heaven. Mainstream and horror audiences made the film a blockbuster.

The positive assessment of the film at the time may be over-enthusiastic, yet it survives scrutiny fifteen years later. *Species* remains a ripping good horror show about the first significant new malevolent alien of the nineties to even remotely rival the creations of previous decades, *Alien* in 1979 and the *Predator* in 1987. And *Species*, unlike many big name horror films of the decade, also boasts a specific sub-text about the fears of men surrounding female sexuality. Natasha Henstridge, the film's villainous Sil, also gives a breakthrough performance, showcasing a fetching, innocent sexuality on one hand, and amazing, brutal cunning on the other.

Using S.E.T.I. as its starting point, *Species* offers a cautionary tale

about overreaching science. Earth scientists working for the United States government receive a "recipe" from space about how to build an alien/ human hybrid. As is the case in *Jurassic Park* (1993), just because scientists can do a thing, they do that thing. They play God, making decisions that cause chaos. "We decided to make it female to make it more docile and controllable," establishes Xavier Fitch, and well, that was the scientist's second mistake. The female Sil is capable of bearing hundreds of alien children, ones that can overrun and conquer the Earth. All she needs is the right man to mate with.

And we all know that Earth guys are easy.

Species very quickly adopts the familiar framework, almost, of a slasher film, with an adult Sil seeking out, rejecting, and then murdering respective mates in a series of bloody set-pieces, while the police procedural characters—a crack government team—plays catch-up. Sil also shows a distinctly catty side, ripping out the spine of a female competitor at a night club. The club incidentally is called "The Id," and *Species* makes much over the fact that Sil has no "moral sense," that she is controlled by the id and acts by instinct. She doesn't understand the human social graces and is still, developmentally, a child.

Species functions so effectively as a horror thriller primarily because Henstridge plays her part completely straight, completely innocent, speaking any dialogue that comes to her character's mind with total candor. When in the hot tub with a prospective mate, a man (Whip Hubley) she just picked up, Sil declares, "I want a baby." Naturally, that's a buzz-kill for this guy, who's just seeking some fun, and he blanches.

Another scene is actually touching and more than a bit strange: in a store window Sil is mesmerized, momentarily, by a wedding dress. Is the desire to wed, to marry in a ceremony, part of the alien genome or human genome? When Sil wanders out of the store later, wearing the wedding dress, it's a testament to unloosed id, with no underlying social structure. She wants a baby, she wants to mate, and she wants the dress. But the forms around those things are "alien" to her.



Sil (Natasha Henstridge) test-drives prospective breeding stock (Whip Hubley) in the sexually-themed alien invasion film *Species* (1995).



An unlucky man (Whip Hubley) gets an alien hand on his shoulder in *Species*.

Throughout the film, Sil also experiences dreams of sexual intercourse, and these dreams are Giger-esque nightmares with biomechanoid male and females coiled around each other, phallic-shaped tubes intertwined, and breasts with spiked nipples rubbing against one another.

And when Sil transforms into an adult, she goes through a chrysalis stage, becoming a gigantic, man-eating womb that takes in nutrients from the surrounding perimeter. For all intents and purposes she is a "walking vagina dentate"⁵⁵ according to Dominique Manion and James Ursini in their book *Warrior Women on the Screen*, embodying a man's subconscious fear of a powerful woman, and one

who is receptive sexually not to simply one male, but many. Her sexual power is his worst nightmare.

Although *Species* ends with some very poor CGI effects, the Sil suit is pretty impressive. Unfortunately, once Henstridge finally leaves the picture to become the "alien" version of her character, the movie loses some essential human connection to the material and to the character of Sil. For all her man-eating ways, Sil has very quickly become the film's focal point of audience attachment, identifying, even, with her drive to mate. The audience has seen her, as a small girl, doomed to be killed (by gassing) by over-reaching scientists. It has witnessed her very human dreams of being chased (by a Gigeresque locomotive), it has shared her fear at her metamorphosis, her physiological change into something unknown. Once the film descends into a chase in the sewers with flame throwers and other weapons and Sil is just another extra-terrestrial monster to kill, the movie loses much of its appeal, sexual and otherwise.

But that doesn't mean that, along the way, *Species* isn't filled with interesting sexual observations about our species. Laura wonders "which half " of Sil was the "predatory half," suggesting that the aliens used human nature against itself. The film is also clever in its suggestion that humans might be perceived by an advanced race as a "galactic weed" that might "spread across the universe," and Sil is a biological weapon, an insurance policy against such expansion.

Species is a Hollywood horror machine, but Natasha Henstridge's game portrayal of Sil makes the character fully three-dimensional, and the writing is clever enough to pay tribute to human nature ... particularly sexual nature. The men in the film are easy pickings for Sil, and she very nearly destroys the planet because of it. *Species* reflects society's fear of an aggressive, over-committed woman as a sexual being, and more than that, hints at a potential alien fear that we're going to copulate our way right to the stars.

LEGACY: A disappointing sequel, *Species 2* (1998), followed in 1998, with Natasha Henstridge returning as the human friendly sibling of Sil, called Eve. The film, directed by Peter Medak, also introduced the male of the "species." Direct-to-video efforts, *Species III* (2004) and *Species IV* (2007) revived the franchise for a new century, but without Henstridge's participation.

Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight * * 1/2

Cast and Crew

CAST: Billy Zane (The Collector); William Sadler (Frank Brayker); Jada Pinkett (Jeryline);

Brenda Bakke (Cordelia); CCH Pounder (Irene); Dick Miller (Willie); Thomas Haden Church (Roach); John Schuck (Sheriff Tupper); Gary Farmer (Deputy Bob Martel); Charles Fleischer

(Wally Enfield); Tim De Zarn (Homer); John Kassir (The Voice of the Crypt Keeper).

CREW: Universal presents an Ernest Dickerson film. *Casting:* Jaki Brown-Karman. *Co-Producers:* Alan Katz, Scott Nimerfo. *Music:* Ed Shearmur. *Film Editor:* Stephen Lovejoy. *Production Designer:* Christian Wagener. *Director of Photography:* Rick Bota. *Executive Producers:* Richard Donner, David Giler, Walter Hill, Joel Silver, Robert Zemeckis. *Tales from the Crypt originally published by:* William M. Gaines. *Written by:* Ethan Reiff, Cyrus Voris, Mark Bishop. *Produced by:* Gilbert Adler. *Directed by:* Ernest Dickerson. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The Crypt Keeper (Kassir) introduces viewers to the strange story of Brayker (Sadler), a man in possession of a mystical key coveted by the Devil. Trapped in a house of misfits, including the beautiful Jeryline (Pinkett), Brayker fends off a malevolent demon called The Collector (Zane) and his hell spawn. In the end, Brayker must pass his legacy of guardianship of the key to a new custodian during the siege by the Collector.

COMMENTARY: HBO's hit anthology series *Tales from the Crypt* (1989–1996) transitions to the big screen with Ernest Dickerson's well-shot, enjoyable, and entirely insubstantial feature, *Demon Knight*.

This first movie in the *Crypt* movie franchise boasts a John Carpenter–esque premise: a siege story like *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) or *Prince of Darkness* (1987), but one vetted in the outrageous, cartoon style of a Sam Raimi *Evil Dead* (1983) entry.

Specifically, gruesome, green-eyed demons swarm an isolated half-way house or mission, a religious abode like the church in *Prince*

of *Darkness*, in search of a mystical artifact, much like the Necronomicon from the cabin in the woods in *Evil Dead*.



The Crypt Keeper introduces a story in the feature film version of HBO's anthology, *Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight* (1995).

In this case, the goons of Hell have a charismatic leader, Billy Zane in a ten-gallon cowboy hat, as the proverbial wolf at the door who begs and pleads to be let in.

Even as Zane mouths quips like "humans: you're not worth the flesh you're printed on," the movie adopts off-kilter, cockeyed angles, including one shot that assumes the perspective of a bullet as it races through mid-air. The presentation is good and stylized, and Zane projects menace easily and funnily, clearly having fun with the demonic role.

Demon Knight also features several exposition-oriented flashbacks which reveal the long history of the mystical key that contains the blood of Christ. In one flashback set during World War I, we see Brayker acquire the key after he is told "You're the One" by a dying comrade. That's a torch-passing that gets repeated in the film's conclusion, with another brave and unconventional warrior taking his

place. This time, Pinkett's resourceful heroine is the one to take up the grave responsibility, and the events of *Demon Knight* serve as Jeryline's trial by fire. It would have been interesting for the franchise to feature another tale with this character, now that the exposition had all been established.

Unfortunately, and very unlike the works of John Carpenter which this movie emulates, *Demon Knight* possesses no overriding subtext or deeper meaning. Instead, it plays like a straightforward and amusing but not overly funny or scary comic-book. The action, characterizations and narrative are competent, but one doesn't leave the movie with any strong sense of what it is about or why it was about it. Sam Raimi's films fly like a butterfly and sting like a bee, but the exaggerated compositions of *Demon Knight* don't amount to anything of consequence.

Damningly, the story for *Demon Knight* also doesn't feature the razor edge and droll wit of most episodes of the TV series, *Tales from the Crypt*. Those tales from EC Comics are famous for their twists and turns, and *Demon Knight* doesn't offer anything comparable. Again, it's not that there's anything much wrong in the film's presentation, it's that there isn't much that's intriguing or of interest in the story. There's no feeling that there was a creative drive to tell *this* particular story, and that's a huge contrast to, say, *Tales from the Hood*, which features a blazing *raison d'être*.

Demon Knight feels like a safe bet, the first time up at bat for the franchise in theaters, and that's fine. But it's no home-run. Or even a double, really.

Still, at least *Demon Knight* doesn't strike out like the next entry, *Bordello of Blood*.

Tales from the Hood * * * 1/2

Cast and Crew

CAST: "Welcome to My Mortuary": Clarence Williams III (Mr. Simms); Joe Torry (Stock); De'Aundre Bonds (Boll); Samuel Monroe, Jr. (Bulldog). "Rogue Cop Revelation": Wings Hauser (Strom); Tom Wright (Martin Moorehouse); Anthony Griffith (Newton); Duane Whitaker (Billy). "Boys Do Get Bruised": David Alan Grier (Carl); Brandon Hammond (Walter); Rusty Cundieff (Richard); Paula Jai

Parker (Sissy). KKK Comeuppance: Corbin Bernsen (Duke Metger); Roger Smith (Rhodie); Art Evans (Eli). "Hard Core Convert": Rosalind Cash (Doctor Cushing); Lamont Bentley (Crazy K).

CREW: A Savoy Pictures and 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks Presentation of a Darin Scott Production of a Rusty Cundieff Film. *Casting:* Robi Reed-Humes, Tony Lee, Andrea Reed. *Music:* Christopher Young. *Film Editor:* Charles Borstein. *Production Designer:* Stuart Blatt. *Director of Photography:* Anthony Richmond. *Executive Producer:* Spike Lee. *Produced by:* Darin Scott. *Written by:* Rusty Cundieff, Darin Scott. *Directed by:* Rusty Cundieff.

SYNOPSIS: Three small-time drug dealers in the Hood stop to do business at Simms Funeral Home and are told horrific stories by the creepy mortician, Simms (Williams). The first story involves a rookie cop who helps to avenge the unjust death of a community activist at the hands of his fellow cops. In the second tale, a boy named Walter tells his teacher that there is a monster stalking him in his house. In the third tale, a bigoted ex-KKK "traditional values" gubernatorial candidate runs afoul of a monstrous doll possessed by the spirit of a slave. In the fourth tale, a gangbanger named Crazy-K undergoes behavior modification to escape the slammer. Finally, the three listeners have an unpleasant fate in store, as Simms reveals.

COMMENTARY: As the amusing title indicates, *Tales from the Hood* is *Tales from the Crypt* with an African American twist. Overtly interested in issues of race in America, this is a horror anthology that exhibits a social conscience, but also a sense of balance. Two stories deal with white racists, on the police force and in politics, respectively, who victimize those of color, while the other two feature violence in the black community perpetrated by fellow blacks. Virtually every macabre tale is related to real life 1990s events, too. The result is a solid, entertaining, and at times very creepy effort.

Today, *Tales from the Hood's* best remembered story is likely "KKK Comeuppance," which features a white racist terrorized by ambulatory black dolls, a kind of off-kilter tribute to the Karen Black TV-movie, *Trilogy of Terror*.

The first story, however, "Rogue Cop Revelation," is a revenge-from-beyond-the-grave story with racist cops paying the price for framing and murdering an innocent black activist. Said activist, Clarence, returns from the grave and murders them one at a time, in gruesome and extremely gory fashion.

Wings Hauser plays the lead bad cop, named "Strom" after Dixie Party candidate and U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond from South Carolina. The police stop Clarence in his car and nearly beat him to death for being a "political agitator." The visual of several white cops circling and beating a black man, defenseless on his knees, blatantly recalls the videotaped Rodney King beating, and that's the point. Later, a fire on the street brings to mind the imagery of the Los Angeles Riots that the King verdict spawned.

But the cops in this story aren't merely physical abusers. They are drug dealers interested in framing and discrediting black community leaders and destroying the black culture. In one especially incendiary scene, a white cop pisses on Clarence's grave, a metaphor, no doubt, for the treatment of blacks by whites on the police force.



Clarence Williams III is Mr. Simms, the mortician who takes three gangstas on a terrifying journey in the African American themed *Tales from the Hood* (1995).

The word "nigger" is bandied around a lot here too, but again, that's accurate to the historical record of the 1990s: Mark Fuhrman, detective on the O.J Simpson case, was reported to have used that offensive descriptor by four witnesses at the trial and was even captured using the term on audiotape. Many African Americans also suspected that Fuhrman had planted the glove used to incriminate Simpson, a racially-motivated attack on a black celebrity.

In "Rogue Cop Revelation," the scales of cosmic justice are righted when the evil cops are murdered by the resurrected Clarence. Importantly, a black cop who does not help Clarence is judged just as guilty as the bad cops here. His crime: race betrayal.

Tales from the Hood's second tale, "Boys Do Get Bruised," involves child abuse in a black family. A schoolteacher comes to suspect that a little boy is being beaten at home by his mother's new boyfriend. Little Walter calls the boyfriend a "monster" and draws terrifying pictures of him. *The Twilight Zone* style twist at the end reveals that Walter has the power to give life to his drawings. Meaning that he can not only draw monsters ... he can erase and crumple them up, too.

Again, there's some powerful imagery here. Walter's mother is beaten savagely with a belt in one sequence, and in another, there's an all-out battle for survival in the family kitchen, the "hearth," of this house. Child and partner/spousal abuse is by no means an African American issue alone, but it is important to remember how often abuse occurs in "the hood" of the film's title, an urban neighborhood with low incomes, high unemployment, crowding, too many guns and too much alcohol consumption.

In *Family Violence in a Cultural Perspective: Defining, Understanding, and Combating Abuse*, Dr. Kathleen Malley-Morrison and Dr. Denise A. Hines wrote that living "in neighborhoods with the lowest per capita income was associated with four times the risk of partner violence in comparison to neighborhoods with the highest procapita income."⁵⁶ *Tales from the Hood* laments the conditions that have given rise to the "monster" played by David Alan Grier but locates the cure for such problems in the creative imagination— the education—of the next generation.

The third vignette, the famous "KKK Comeuppance," features a fictionalized version of the controversial David Duke (1950–), a former Grand Wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, who ran for the governorship of Louisiana in 1991 and ultimately won ⁵⁷ percent of the white vote in that election. In favor of segregation and separatism, Duke was convicted for tax fraud in 2002.



In the *Tales from the Hood* tale called "Hard Core Convert," Crazy K (Lamont Bentley, right) gets the screws put to him, in a very tender area, by Dr. Cushing (Rosalind Cash).

In *Tales from the Hood*, the David Duke figure is named Duke Metger. Like his real life model, he's a former Klansman and governor of a Southern state who ultimately seeks the presidency (as Duke sought that high office in 1988 and 1992). Metger lives in an opulent old plantation where black slaves were once abused, and now—in the era of Newt Gingrich's Angry White Man—rails against affirmative action, reparations, and other initiatives that might benefit African Americans.

Forecasting Don Imus, Metger refers to blacks as "nappy-headed" and even mocks Rodney King by sarcastically asking, "Can't we all just get along?" Duke gets his comeuppance when the souls of the murdered slaves come to life inside small, angry dolls buried under the plantation's floor. Those dolls come to life, and Duke uses an American flag to bludgeon both them and the "Voodoo Mother" who gave them life, a visual representation of America's perceived hostility to the African American experience and history.

The special effects in this vignette remain astounding, and Corbin Bernsen gives a courageous, go-for-the-gusto performance as the villainous, racist Metger. He makes the most of a distasteful role, and he's one of those villains audiences love to hate. Some might accuse this particular story of lacking subtlety or nuance, but the details of

Metger's beliefs and history so closely parallel those of David Duke that the argument doesn't hold water. In other words, it's hard to believe anybody could be so utterly hateful to other human beings, no matter the skin color. But if you've ever seen David Duke, you know it's no exaggeration.

The final tale, "Hardcore Convert," commendably gazes at a vicious black figure, an ignorant gangbanger named Crazy-K. Life is cheap to him, and he commits murder over money and drugs as easily as he exhales. In the course of the story, he is incarcerated with a "white power" Nazi, and the message comes through that Crazy-K's anti-social behavior is only doing the Nazi's work for him, confirming the white world's opinion of some blacks as thugs and criminals.

Crazy-K undergoes a "behavior modification" program while in prison and is told by his tormentor/doctor that "you've got to take responsibility to break this chain." The behavior modification regime in this case involves forcing Crazy-K to see real-life, documentary photographs and images of violence perpetrated against blacks in American history. The montage begins with whites killing blacks and terrible lynchings, but by the end, we see blacks murdering blacks and a sub-culture devoted to "gangsta" values. This sequence is simultaneously a critique of white and black violence, and a perfect summation of the film's viewpoint, that indeed, blacks have been victimized by whites throughout American history. But—importantly—they've also been victimized by themselves, and even if they can't change the former, the fact of ignorant white racism, they can change the latter. And need to do so.

Director Rusty Cundieff, who studied journalism at Loyola and also majored in the philosophy of religion, does a terrific job crafting a horror film that is simultaneously poignant and entertaining. *Tales from the Hood* is an audacious, fearless enterprise, and you can't do much better than that in a 1990s-era horror film.

***A Vampire in Brooklyn* * ***

Critical Reception

"Hardcore schlock director Wes Craven heads straight for what *Mad* might call humorlessness in a jugular vein. They cram more pointless obscenity than wit into the script and insist on all the vampire-genre conventions.... [William] Marshall's 1972 *Blacula*

seems like a masterpiece of intellectual humor by comparison."—Ralph Novak, *People Weekly*, November 13, 1995, page 26

"What makes *Vampire in Brooklyn* work in a way no Eddie Murphy movie has really managed since the first *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984) is director Wes Craven. Like his contemporaries David Cronenberg and George Romero, Craven is a master of movie horror. But unlike either of them, he also has a strange, dark sense of humor. That gives his movies ... an extra edge. *Vampire in Brooklyn* is one Eddie Murphy movie viewers can sink their teeth into."—Michael Wilmington, *Chicago Tribune*, October 27, 1995

"The 'urban horror film' was a short-lived subgenre. One can trace it back to Wes Craven's *The People Under the Stairs* or Clive Barker's *Candyman*, or even further back to the low-budget *Def by Temptation*. Unfortunately, Wes Craven's *A Vampire in Brooklyn* follows the questionable horror-comedy mold created by *Temptation*, with Craven opting for more humor and star Eddie Murphy opting for more horror. Unfortunately, Murphy can't pull off the horror. At the beginning of the film, he arrives in full Dracula regalia on an abandoned ship in Brooklyn harbor and does his best to menace the night watchman. But Eddie Murphy is no Nosferatu, and the night watchman's comic response ('You ain't got to pull that Blacula shit with me, man...') undercuts the star's performance. In her role as Murphy's bride-to-be Angela Bassett tries to be just as intense as Murphy and her performance is just as hopelessly overshadowed by Kadeem Hardison's wisecracking Renfield. Instead of giving the classic vampire story some new blood, the urban humor makes the horror plot seem ridiculously melodramatic. The film might still have worked as a black comedy if Murphy was in on the joke, but the only scene where he really comes to life is when he morphs (via *Nutty Professor*-style makeup and effects) into the perverse Preacher Pauley, who tells his sheepish congregation that 'evil is good and ass is even better.' After that, the film transforms back into a bloodless melodrama."—Joseph Maddrey, *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Eddie Murphy (Maximillian); Angela Bassett (Rita); Allen

Payne (Justice); Kadeem Hardison (Julius Jones); John Witherspoon (Silas); Zakes Mokae (Dr. Zeko); Joanna Cassidy (Captain Dewey); Simba Khali (Nikki); Missiri Freeman (Eva); Nick Corri (Anthony); Mitch Pileggi (Tony); W. Earl Brown (Thrasher); Adu Adeyemi (Bartender); Troy Curvey, Jr. (Choir Leader); Vickilyn Reynolds (Mrs. Brown); William Blount (Deacon Brown); Joe Costanza (Bear); John LA Mota (Lizzy); Marcelo Tubert (Waiter); Nick De Mauro (Caprisi); Jerry Hall (Woman in Park); Mark Haining (Man in Park).

CREW: A Paramount Pictures release. *Casting:* Eileen Mack Knight. *Music:* J. Peter Robinson. *Costume Designer:* Ha Nguyen. *Film Editor:* Patrick Lussier. *Director of Photography:* Mark Irwin. *Art directors:* Gary Diamond, Cynthia Charette. *Executive Producers:* Marianne Maddalena, Stuart M. Besser. *Story:* Eddie Murphy, Vernon Lynch, Charles Murphy. *Written by:* Charles Murphy, Michael Lucker, Chris Parker. *Produced by:* Eddie Murphy, Mark Lipsky. *Directed by:* Wes Craven. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 103 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The vampire called Maximillian (Murphy) travels from his home in the Bermuda Triangle to the Port of Brooklyn in search of the one known offspring of his people who was born in a foreign land, the beautiful Rita (Bassett). After making a man named Julian (Harrison) his ghoul, Maximillian learns that Rita is a police officer and unaware of her destiny. She "sleepwalks" in humanity, and Maximillian sets about waking her up to her true nature as Nosferatu.

COMMENTARY: Horror great Wes Craven is the equivalent of a gun for hire on this vanity Eddie Murphy project, a vampiric variation on the comedian's 1986 hit, *Coming to America*. A typical nineties horror comedy (think along the lines of *Innocent Blood*), *A Vampire in Brooklyn* sports an uneven mix of laughs and scares, even while dutifully trotting out all the vampire film conventions.

A Vampire in Brooklyn has its moments. The score from Craven regular J. Peter Robinson is delightfully overblown, and Murphy does a credible job as a regal vampire more in line with the tradition of Bela Lugosi than Gary Oldman. Murphy sports a Caribbean accent, which is a nice touch, and doesn't go overboard looking for the comedy, leaving that task instead to Kadeem Harrison's outrageous Julius Jones. The relationship between Bassett's Rita and Murphy's Maximillian is also rather charming, though again you have to wonder why so many vampire films of the nineties must simultaneously function as "love stories" as well as straight-up horror tales.

Unfortunately, *A Vampire in Brooklyn*'s screenplay is not nearly sharp or original enough to convey the sought-after feeling of an old-fashioned vampire tale updated to modern Brooklyn. Instead, the writers apparently felt obligated to trot through every vampire tradition, as if these familiar scenes would prove revelatory to fans. As a result, viewers are treated to all the old standbys: vampire as fog, vampire as bat, vampire as wolf, plus an assortment of other set-pieces, such as a mirror displaying no reflection and the undead menaced by such slayer weapons as garlic and crosses.

The Julius Jones material is also largely retread stuff. Kadeem Harrison is a funny guy, and he's amusing to watch as his undead body goes to pieces, but the same gag was handled with more aplomb in John Landis's *An American Werewolf in London*. Additionally, this film's Mafia angle (and Italian-American settings too) seems right out of the aforementioned Landis film, *Innocent Blood*.

What sinks *A Vampire in Brooklyn* fast is the low-brow, lowest-common-denominator, stereotyped African American humor. "Ahoy, mother fucker!" shouts one character, and you just want to crawl under your seat. It's kind of pitiful to see horror's Horatio Algers, Wes Craven, reduced to this cheap brand of humor, especially after his achievement with *People Under the Stairs*. The movie strives to be self-referential, too, mostly to African American themed horror—there's a reference to *Blacula*—but it's mostly undone by the crassness of the lines given to the supporting cast.

Not to worry, though, Craven and Murphy both rebounded strongly in 1996, Craven with *Scream* and Murphy with the mega-hit *The Nutty Professor*.

Village of the Damned * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"John Carpenter stumbled here. This should have been a slam dunk. Christopher Reeve gives what is debatably his finest acting performance in this film. Carpenter and Dave Davies made some nice music. But this never comes close to the quality of Wolf Rilla's original. Kirstie Alley is fairly ridiculous. Linda Koslowski of *Crocodile Dundee* fame gives the best performance in the film. The original film is held in considerable esteem, so maybe this was just something that should never have been remade. There

was really nothing new to say here. Remakers out there— study Cronenberg's *The Fly*."— William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"It's unfortunate that this would be one of Christopher Reeve's final films before his crippling accident. Along with Kirstie Alley, he faces off with those creepy platinum blonde kids in this lackluster remake of the 1960 terror classic. John Carpenter's love for the source material is evident, but he falls short of making this a very good picture. Perhaps something was lost in the transition from black-and-white to color...."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christopher Reeve (Dr. Alan Chaffee); Kirstie Alley (Dr. Susan Verner); Linda Koslowski (Jill McGowan); Michael Pare (Frank McGowan);

Mark Hamill (the Reverend George); Meredith Salenger (Melanie Roberts); Peter Jason (Ben Blum); Constance Forslund (Cally Blum); Pippa Peartree (Sarah); Karen Kuhn (Barbara Chaffee); Thomas Dekker (David); Lindsey Haun (Mara);

Cody Dorkin (Roger); George Buck Flower (Carlton).

CREW: Universal Pictures presents an Alphaville Production. *Casting:* Reuben Cannon. *Music:* John Carpenter and Dave Davies. *Film Editor:* Edward A. Warschilka. *Special Effects and Make-up:* KNB EFX Group, Robert Kurtzman, Gregory Nicotero, Howard Berger. *Director of Photography:* Gary B. Kibbe. *Executive Producers:* James Jack, Sean Daniels, Ted Vernon, Shep Gordon, Andre Blay. *Based on the book The Midwich Cuckoos by:* John Wyndham *and the 1960 screenplay by:* Sterling Silliphant, Wolf Rilla and George Barclay. *Written by:* David Himmelstein. *Produced by:* Michael Preger, Sandy King. *Directed by:* John Carpenter. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 99 minutes.

P.O.V.: "God said let us make man in our own image after our likeness. But image does not mean outer image, or every statue or photograph would be man. It means the inner image, the spirit, the soul ... but what of those in our midst who do not have individual souls or spirits? ... They have the look of man, but not the nature of mankind."—The Reverend George (Mark Hamill) discusses "the

children" of Midwich in John Carpenter's *Village of the Damned*

SYNOPSIS: On the day of the annual picnic in Midwich, something unseen and malicious moves over the placid, wide-open skies. At precisely 10: 00 A.M., it strikes and every person and animal within the town boundaries falls inexplicably unconscious. When the citizenry awakes, all the women of child-rearing age are pregnant. A government scientist, Dr. Verner (Alley), convinces the women of Midwich to carry the babies to term. After the mystery children are born, the platinum-haired kids exhibit signs of a hive or group intelligence and seem to lack human emotions. Dr. Alan Chaffee (Reeve) attempts to stop the children's wave of telekinetic violence in Midwich, even as the townspeople form a mob to kill the changelings, even his daughter, Mara (Haun). At the same time, one woman discovers that her child, David (Dekker), may possess the seeds of humanity.

COMMENTARY: John Carpenter's *Village of the Damned* is a remake of the beloved 1960 black-and-white classic directed by Wolf Rilla, itself an adaptation of John Wyndham's book *The Midwich Cuckoos*). All three works focus on children of extra-terrestrial origin and the world's response to these changelings.

There are many aspects of this Clinton era adaptation that just don't seem to work as well as they should, and all stem from one particular creative decision: the apparent necessity of transplanting the events of the drama from an isolated, homogeneous English village in the 1960s to modern, diverse America in the 1990s. In other words, many of the problems exist at a script level or at the level of intention.

For instance, in a small, isolated English community of decades past, it is possible to believe that all the villagers attend the same church and are of the same religious persuasion. Somehow, we can accept the uniform nature of the indigenous population in that foreign, cloistered, slightly timeless setting.

In John Carpenter's *Village of the Damned*, however, there is just one church and one priest played by an oddly-bitchy Mark Hamill in Midwich, and all the new mothers without exception even attend the same "mass Baptism" service. This may sound like a small matter, but it means that there are no Jews, no Muslims, and no atheists in Midwich. Just Christians. And Christians of the same denomination,

apparently. Again, that just doesn't quite ring true. On a purely human level, would every mother and father involved agree to a mass baptism instead of an individual one?

This "one-size fits all" dilemma extends beyond the film's central narrative to the appearance of the children themselves. In the original film, the children wore relatively ascetic-looking clothing that was contextually accurate to a life in the 1960s and in England. The clothing read to our eyes as "gray" or "black" because, simply, the film was shot in black-and-white. Again, there's a sort of timeless quality to it.

In John Carpenter's *Village of the Damned*, the Midwich children—all from different families—universally wear similar gray clothes ... but a color world surrounds them. The filmmakers were no doubt groping for an "equivalent" look to that which was utilized in the 1960s original, but it's a "one size fits all" solution that doesn't make sense on more than a surface level.

Are viewers to assume these children, at age seven, have no older (human) half-brothers and sisters in their families, and therefore no hand-me-downs to wear? That the children shop at the nearest Gap, but that their parents only purchase slate-gray outfits for them there? Even if the parents were forced to somehow purchase only gray clothes, it seems likely that someone might comment on this oddity.

One could argue that there is a distinct leitmotif in the film concerning "eyes." It is the eyes which are the source of the alien power, and Mara and Chafee discuss eyes being "windows of the soul." Perhaps the gray clothes result from the fact that the children are color blind. That's a shot in the dark, however. The film does not establish that idea even indirectly. You get the feeling that this was a visual decision—to garb all the children in grays (in a color world)—and it doesn't quite make logical sense.

That kind of unquestioned, "one size fits all" thinking is all over *Village of the Damned*. Take, for instance, the impressive night-time shot of the caravan heading to the hospital. Car headlights stretch over the horizon as the delivery date finally arrives. Again, a beautiful composition and a great visual, but we are made to understand that the pregnant women deliver at exactly the same time on the same night.

I understand the women have been implanted by aliens, but the aliens are gestating inside the bodies of human women and those human bodies are individual. Each one is unique. I assume that during their pregnancies, the mothers-to-be had different diets and different exercise regimes, for example.

Seems to me those factors would also determine how fast or how strongly the baby develops in each woman. Just like all the children wearing gray, or all the denizens of Midwich attending the same church, this mass exodus to the hospital reeks of plot contrivance or convenience. On a simpler level, is it believable that every woman would still be living in the same town at delivery time, anyway? (Again, that could be a stipulation for the Federal funding, but that's not established in the text of the film.)

And the plot of *Village of the Damned* clearly encompasses several years. At least seven or eight years pass, considering the age of the children by the film's climax. And yet there is no on-screen indication that time has passed for any characters other than the children. Just think for a moment how greatly cars have changed from 2000 to 2010. Think of how different your street looks today than it did almost a decade ago. But seriously, fashions change, haircuts change, people move from one home to another, and people gain weight over the years.

Yet, *Village of the Damned* skips over seven or eight years in the blink of an eye, and adult characters don't change at all. Not what they wear, not how they style their hair, nothing. For once in a Carpenter film, the action scenes aren't particularly well-handled either. They come across as minor and not particularly scary. One character is injured when she is forced to squeeze painful medical drops into her eyes. That incident may have read as dramatic on the page, but on the screen it just seems, well ... silly.

Some of the pacing seems off, too. Carpenter acquits himself well with the film's climax: with Chafee blocking his thoughts with images of a brick wall from the children, even as a bomb ticks down to destruction. But the scene leading up to that finale—a sustained assault on the children by local police and a helicopter—seems entirely unnecessary. For one thing, we know the government is going to bomb the dickens out of Midwich anyway (because that's what they did with the other "colonies"), so why bother to send police forces in on the ground where they'll just be cannon fodder?



Dr. Alan Chaffee (Christopher Reeve) discusses extra-terrestrial children with Dr. Susan Verner (Kirstie Alley) in John Carpenter's *Village of the Damned* (1995).

Village of the Damned fails because of the relentless accumulation of little things like these aforementioned points. By itself, not one of these issues is enough to scuttle the film. But taken in combination, the film seems slap-dash, careless. Also, *Village of the Damned* leaves the entire hotbutton issue of reproductive rights entirely unexcavated. When does society consider it right to "terminate" a pregnancy? Is life sacred, no matter what the origin? As I wrote in *The Films of John Carpenter*, I felt that the movie missed so many possibilities and opportunities by avoiding the issue of abortion altogether.

And yet, perhaps there is a 1990s subtext at work here too, concerning a different 1990s issue: *race relations*. In particular, there's the story of 25-year-old Rodney King, his beating by police officers (which left one of his eye sockets shattered, one broken leg and a fractured cheekbone). This was the incident that led to the terrible riots of April 29, 1992.

Suddenly, hatred begat hatred, begat hatred, again and again, across the diverse population of Los Angeles. A shaken Rodney King timidly went before a camera crew in an attempt to stop the violence. He famously asked: "Can we get along? Can we stop making it, making it horrible for the older people and the kids? ... It's just not right. It's not right."

That question—"can we get along?"—is the very question that

appears to underline *Village of the Damned*, produced just two years after the L.A. riots. Late in the film, a character involved in the racially-charged battle between the alien children and defensive mankind asks—in a clear echo of King's appeal—"Why can't we just live together?"

Examine the scenario closely, and you can detect how this remake involves two races in one society jockeying for superiority ... and survival. Even young David feels intense race-based pressure to conform to his kind, to side with, essentially, his "skin color," the aliens. Meanwhile, the majority race (the humans) fear that which is new, different and "alien" among them. They fear a loss of humanity's role as the master of the planet. The humans want to protect that which is theirs, and which has always been theirs: the "human" way of life. They want things to be as they have been traditionally (and hence, theirs is the conservative, safeguard argument).

By contrast, the minority (the alien children) views the same battle not in terms of "hate" but rather as a "biological imperative," a stand for their own culture, which is in danger of being either assimilated or destroyed by the larger, more powerful culture. In the end, standing between these two entrenched racial viewpoints is—literally—a brick wall that seemingly cannot be breached. Chaffee talks about competition vs. cooperation, and the superiority of human emotions, but even he is not impartial in his judgment. His prejudices are already set in stone. Mara—the leader of the children—calls him "a prisoner of his values." She is thus arguing for a progressive cause: an acceptance of a new viewpoint outside that which is traditional and known.



Dr. Chaffee (Reeve) pleads for compassion with a child of alien parentage, David (Thomas Dekker), while his mother (Linda Kozlowski) looks on. From *Village of the Damned*.

The children (violently) stand up for their way of life ("there are going to be changes...") while the adults of Midwich attempt to kill or bully them. Religion turns them into a convenient scapegoat, and the Reverend of Midwich compares them to devils, or demons. George Buck Flower, appearing in a cameo, attempts to frighten and intimidate the children, telling them directly, "you ain't right!" The children fight back with lethal, ugly, force.

Viewed in terms of "race" relations, one can start to see how some of *Village of the Damned's* apparent weaknesses start to be mitigated, at least a little. It even seems necessary that the adults are treated in as monolithic a fashion as the children (as merely humans, rather than as Catholics, atheists, Jews, liberals or conservatives) because every little difference begins to take away from the central metaphor. It is much more important to see the battle as being between humans on one side and the children on the other.

Even the distinguishing features of the aliens—those trademark gray clothes and bad platinum wigs—visually characterize the race "differences" we are meant to note. And the lethargic, overlong police attack on the children? In some way that too reflects the specifics of a race war: the law enforcement arm of the majority has come to wipe out the minority. It's Rodney King all over again, only here Rodney King is telekinetic, mad and quite capable of defending himself. And

when the children riot, it is bloody.

And consider this too. Perhaps the townspeople of Midwich are picking up those objectionable torches (what I once believed was a silly touch in a 1995 horror movie) because they're going to a "high-tech" genre lynching (Clarence Thomas' description of another racially-tinged event of the 1990s: his 1991 confirmation hearings for the Supreme Court). The image of the torch is resonant in American history and consistent with the overall racial motif. The torch explicitly reminds one of a KKK rally, or some such thing: of a mad mob out to destroy the reviled "other," the "outsider" living in "our town."

Although many townspeople and the children die in the film, *Village of the Damned* is not without hope on the subject of race relations. David shows the capacity for love and other "human emotions" and is thus a bridge between man and alien ... the hope for the future. Interestingly, the character of David was not featured in the original film, and therefore one must conclude that he was added here—in a turbulent time—so as to show that a peace was possible between the races and that race difference need not necessarily end in riot, death or assimilation.

Maybe all the awkward, weird elements of *Village of the Damned* actually further the film's leitmotif of a looming race war, of racial intolerance and hatred in America. If that's the case, then it's possible that the critics, including myself, have under-valued the movie.

Nearly all of John Carpenter's films also feature some strong anti-authoritarian message. *Prince of Darkness* and *Vampires* take aim at the Catholic Church. *Escape from L.A.* and *They Live* go after the Republican Party, and even *Halloween* exposes "holes" in our apparently safe infrastructure (law enforcement, medicine, parents, psychology). *Village of the Damned* is no different, but here the target of Carpenter's maverick streak seems to be irresponsible, grasping science.

It is irresponsible science (and conspiratorial government) that allows the alien children to grow inside human women, out of "curiosity." It is irresponsible science (represented by Alley's Verner) that keeps the secret of the aliens for so long, from the affected populace. It is alien science, of course, responsible for the strangest experimentation of all: the implantation of alien embryos into human wombs.

This anti-science message was part and parcel of the 1990s too. *The X-Files* (1993–2002) concerned, rather explicitly, alien experiments involving human gestation (in episodes such as "The

Beginning" and in the first feature film *Fight the Future*). Episodes such as "Soft Light" revealed the danger of forward-pushing science carried too far too fast. This whole philosophy of "tampering in God's domain" again came into vogue because of rapid technological advances in the 1990s.

This was the era that saw the computer Deep Blue beat a chess master, cloning become a reality, and the development of the human genome project. But what was the moral authority behind such science? If you reject the race war analysis of *Village of the Damned*, you might consider in its stead the film as an anti-science screed, one concerning the danger of genetic experiments carried to—literally—Aryan ends (blond haired, physically-perfect white children are the result). These Aryans wear uniforms (the gray outfits) that visually recall the uniformity of Hitler Youth. The children are also frighteningly dispassionate in the pursuit of their goals.

In the end, *Village of the Damned* is not a great film. However, it does possess a powerful visual component. In particular, the first half of the film is very strong. The movie opens as an alien shadow goes by overhead, in a series of menacing aerial shots. On the soundtrack, we hear an inhuman whispering ... like a storm is slowly building, like something is watching. Carpenter handles this section of the film deftly, generating a strong sense of paranoia and also voyeurism. The aliens are among us—chattering—but we don't see them.

Carpenter's macabre sense of humor is also entirely intact here. One of my favorite moments in the film involves the Midwich fellow cooking hot dogs at the town picnic. Last year he burned the hot dogs, goes the gossip. This year, however, he falls asleep on the grill during the time of the alien "black out"—and burns himself to a crisp. When the picnic-goers awake, Carpenter cuts to a shot of the grill and we see a smoking, flamebroiled human form splayed out there. This is wicked fun, pure and simple, and the kind of nightmarish vision we expect in a carefullycrafted Carpenter film.

Many Carpenter films look better across the passage of years, as the director's neo-classic virtues stand out more and more from today's interchangeable, TV-style movies. Ultimately, I submit that is also the case for *Village of the Damned*. Carpenter's skill behind the camera makes a difference and elevates the film. In the final analysis, *Village of the Damned* may not be a good film, but thanks to Carpenter's visual aplomb, it at least looks like a good film. In the 1990s, that was often enough.

Cast and Crew

CAST: Denzel Washington (Parker Barnes); Russell Crowe (SID 6.7); Kelly Lynch (Madison Carter); Stephen Spinella (Lindenmeyer); William Forsythe (William Cochran); William Fichtner (Wallace); Louise Fletcher (Elizabeth Deane); Kevin J. O'Connor (Clyde Reilly); Costas Mandylor (John Donovan); Kaley Cuoco (Karin); Traci Lords (Media Zone Singer).

CREW: Paramount Pictures Presents a Gary Lucchesi Production, a Brett Leonard Film. *CASTING:* Deborah Aquila, Jane Shannon. *MUSIC:* Christopher Young. *COSTUME DESIGNER:* Francine Jamison-Tunchuck. *SPECIAL VISUAL EFFECTS:* L2 Communications. *VISUAL EFFECTS SUPERVISOR:* Jon Townley. *FILM EDITOR:* B.J. Sears, Rob Hobrin. *PRODUCTION DESIGNER:* Nilo Rodis. *DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:* Gale Tattersall. *EXECUTIVE PRODUCER:* Howard W. Koch, Jr. *WRITTEN BY:* Eric Beirat. *PRODUCED BY:* Gary Lucchesi. *DIRECTED BY:* Brett Leonard. *MPAA RATING:* R. *RUNNING TIME:* 105 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A virtual reality simulation named SID 6.7 (Crowe) uses nanotechnology to be born in the real world. Unfortunately, SID 6.7 is a sinister amalgamation of virtually every serial killer and sociopath in history, including John Wayne Gacy, Charles Manson, and Adolf Hitler. Disgraced cop, Parker Barnes (Washington), is released from prison to track down SID because he came closer than anyone else to defeating SID in VR. Unleashed in Los Angeles, SID goes on a murderous reign of terror, kidnapping Karin, the daughter of Barnes' psychiatrist, Madison Carter (Lynch). Unfortunately, Barnes recognizes SID's modus operandi as belonging to the political terrorist Matthew Grimes, the man who cost him the life of his wife and daughter.

COMMENTARY: The popular nineties conceit of the supernatural (or super-powered) serial killer gets a computerized upgrade in Brett Leonard's *Virtuosity*, a film that incorporates a "science run amok" angle with the police procedural. In particular, SID 6.7 (Russell Crowe) is a computersimulation with a "self-evolving neural network" who is built on the "genetic algorithms" of his torical murders including John Wayne Gacy, Charles Manson, Adolf Hitler, Saddam

Hussein and the movie's fictional boogeyman, a terrorist named Matthew Grimes (Murray).



Parker Barnes (Denzel Washington, right) and Dr. Madison Carter (Kelly Lynch, middle) discuss the escape of a virtual reality serial killer, SID, with Elizabeth Deane (Louise Fletcher) in *Virtuosity* (1995).

After SID escapes from his virtual reality environs and into the real world, he goes on a crime spree and reign of terror, and the only person who can stop him is a "fallen" cop, Parker Barnes, played by Denzel Washington. This cop character is straight out of the serial killer paradigm playbook. He suffers from the "hero with the tragic past" syndrome, since Grimes blew up (or rather made Barnes blow up) his family and now he is wracked with guilt and has lost his dignity and the respect of his peers. He pursues SID in return for a "full pardon."

But SID, having been born of a simulation or game, wants to play a game in the real world because "killing for real is such a rush." In one memorable, if slightly over-the-top, sequence, SID takes an entire night-club crowd hostage and composes a symphony entirely of his prisoners' screams of terror. Crowe plays SID light, silly and kind of goofy, but oddly enough, the approach works. This serial killer has a chaotic, Loki-like

quality that lends some unpredictability to what is a very

familiar and well-explored subgenre. This is a "virtual" necessity in a film with such action-movie clichés as the wrong-headed superior, the endangered kid, and the sexy cop/ partner love-interest.

Virtuosity draws interesting comparison between its hero and villain. Barnes has a prosthetic arm and is, by verdict of the law, considered a multiple murderer. SID is also composed of synthetic parts (he was built by nano-technology) and is a serial killer. SID even tells Parker that "I came to be because of what you are."

Where these men differ is in SID's apparent obsessive need to show-off, his human quality of vanity. In charting this tragic flaw, *Virtuosity* brings in another 1990s angle: commentary on the "tabloid culture."

Specifically, SID appears on a program called "Death TV" and plays to the audience. The more outrageous he becomes, the more online ratings soar. Now we know where Glenn Beck came from.

Anyway, the key to defeating SID is to take away his audience. This denies him his victims' fear, and also deprives his ego of its energy source. But between "Death TV" and the tabloid show called "As It Happened," *Virtuosity*— set in a nearfuture world—projects an America of almost constant televised bread and circuses. In real life, perhaps from exhaustion and disgust over the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal, the tabloid talk shows mostly burned themselves out. In 2010, they are hardly a component of the daily TV "diet" (supplanted in part by reality TV). But in the mid- 1990s, *Virtuosity's* extrapolation of a gossip, truecrime obsessed future America certainly seemed spot-on.

Action-packed and featuring the most popular horror movie archetype of the decade—the serial killer— *Virtuosity* is entertaining and fast-paced, if not deep. The movie's final twist, a visit into the virtual reality realm where SID was spawned, is reasonably inventive, and enough to give the movie a bit of a boost on its way out. Denzel played a cop again in 1998's *Fallen*, again going up against a super-powered serial killer (this time a body-hopping demon). Overall, that's a better horror film, even if *Virtuosity* provides a superior villain in the mugging, vain, well-dressed SID 6.7.

Wes Craven Presents Mind Ripper

(a.k.a. *The Outpost*) * 1/2 (DTV)

CAST: Lance Henriksen (Dr. Jim Stockton); John Diehl (Alex Hunter); Natasha Wagner (Wendy Stockton); Giovanni Ribisi (Scott Stockton); Gregory Sporleder (Rob); Dan Blom (Thor); Adam Solomon (Mark); John Apicella (Larry); Peter Shepherd (Frank); Claire Stansfield (Joanne).

CREW: A Kushner-Locke Company, an Outpost Production. *Costume Designer:* Elizabeth Jett. *Special Make-up Effects:* Image Animation. *Music:* J. Peter Robinson. *Film Editor:* Harry Hitner. *Production Designer:* Jeremy Levine. *Director of Photography:* Fernando Arguelles. *Executive Producer:* Wes Craven. *Written by:* Jonathan Craven, Phil Mittleman. *Produced by:* Wes Craven. *Directed by:* Joe Gayton. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of scientists employed by Gentec monitor the progress of a strange patient, a mutant, in an abandoned nuclear outpost in the desert. The patient, Thor (Blom), is illicitly given ten times the amount of experimental virus that was intended and soon escapes from captivity. On a camping trip, the former head of the project, Dr. Stockton (Henriksen), and his family are forced to battle Thor, who has gone on a murder spree.

COMMENTARY: At first intended as *The Hills Have Eyes 3*, Wes Craven's *Mind Ripper* (or *The Outpost*) plays like a compilation film of all the best bits from the more expensive and better *Alien* franchise.

Like *Aliens* (1986), *Mind Ripper* is set primarily in a high-tech installation of dark corridors and dead ends. Like Sigourney Weaver's Ripley in that film, the heroine here is a resourceful, guntoting beauty who is also the voice of reason and sanity. The monster of this film is a genetically engineered human— *science run amok!*— who even cocoons people just like the aliens do in the Cameron picture. And Thor even sports a biological killing mechanism. While the xenomorph of *Aliens* boasts a ferocious silver jaw tucked inside another jaw, which protrudes and smashes the faces of its victims, the creature in *Mind Ripper* has an internal mouth tongue that also shatters the faces of enemies.

Other characters are *Aliens* retreads too. Like Paul Reiser's space yuppie, Carter Burke, Alex in *Mind Ripper* is a selfish and ambitious capitalist acting on his own agenda in order to attain wealth. Even the

fact that the mutant is being developed for an agency, the U.S. Army, mimics the *Alien* pictures.

Mind Ripper opens in an installation cafeteria with small talk among the crew, and one scientist complains about the bonuses, mimicking almost word-for-word Yaphet Kotto's remarks as Parker about the bonus situation early in Ridley Scott's *Alien*. Damningly, the *Mind Ripper* scientists also hunt Thor in the dark corridors with a portable tracking device that beeps and alarms at the appropriate moment, much like the devices in the first two *Alien* films, even if it doesn't operate on the principle of "micro-changes in air density."

The *Alien* saga is not the only source that *Mind Ripper* references. In some senses, it also explores the same territory as *The Hills Have Eyes*: a dysfunctional family with an alienated son goes on a camping trip but is waylaid in the desert. Once there, lives are threatened and the siblings are forced to overcome society's conventions and norms. They even contemplate the use of their father's corpse (for his hand-print) to escape the installation.

Unlike *The Hills Have Eyes*, however, *Mind Ripper* cops out on its finale. The dad is not dead after all, and the children need not resort to such drastic measures for survival. In *Mind Ripper*, the family loses only obnoxious boyfriend, Mark, and the father was eager to do that since the start of the film anyway.

By the end of the film, Scott's feelings of alienation have subsided and the family is healed even though the son's feelings have not been addressed or confronted. This facile family reconciliation would never occur in a film constructed personally by psychological expert Craven, who—love him or hate him—universally strives for honesty in the pictures he directs.

Mind Ripper's screenplay is pretty weak, and all the characters are either inspired by *Aliens* or cardboard dummies who speak in the peculiar movie language called "Exposition." "Does anyone remember we're out here in this abandoned nuclear dump?" asks one character, alerting the audience to the movie's locale. "He quit because of how we were using his research. Do you think he's gonna come back?" another character wonders, awkwardly but helpfully filling the audience in on some important back-history for Henriksen's character. I won't even comment on the film's joke, voiced by the unfortunate Ribisi, that he couldn't get a "piece of ass" even if he were a "toilet seat."

Mind Ripper makes missteps in terms of originality, execution, writing and performance, but occasionally it rises to the occasion. Director Joe Gayton opens the picture effectively with a high angle

shot, the camera perched high above the craggy terrain of a forbidding desert. The locale is instantly established from this distance as isolated and remote, hence perfect for a horror scenario.

Then Gayton cuts to P.O.V. shots from Thor's perspective as a scientist administers the virus to him. Human faces are lit against a black backdrop, and there are close-ups of the hypodermic syringe. Throughout this opening interlude, the camera sways back and forth, ever so slowly, impressionistically suggesting Thor's disoriented state. After eerie tracking shots of his basement complex, Dayton rapidly creates a link between Thor's heightened hearing and the day-to-day noises of the research team. Close-ups of Thor's ears are cut with the sound effects of Joanne showering, Alex boxing and other scientists talking. This juxtaposition of sound effects and imagery adeptly illustrates that Jim's creation has superhuman auditory capabilities. To Gayton's credit, the first ten minutes of *Mind Ripper* are stylish and interesting, but then the camera soon becomes mired in one dull basement corridor after another.

The film's climax is also botched. Once the survivors have departed the basement in the black van, the music grinds to a dead halt. In *Aliens*, James Horner's pulse-pounding signature score maintained the momentum of the climax upon climax until viewers were left breathless. Without effective music accompanying the action in *Mind Ripper*, Thor's final two attacks on the van and assault on an airplane are totally lacking in suspense and excitement. *Mind Ripper's* denouement sits blandly on the screen without generating anything other than deep indifference. *Mind Ripper* tries three times for a good sting-in-the-tale/tail moment and never achieves it.

Contrarily, *Mind Ripper* succeeds in one scene. For one brief moment, the film creates a sense of empathy for the monstrous, pitiable Thor. Jim Stockton, playing Victor to Thor's Frankenstein Monster, shares a sort of Father/Son bond with Thor, and the movie acknowledges it. Thor remembers a father who was kind to him, and so he spares Stockton's life. Thor also asks questions about his existence, God and his own mortality. For a few moments, then, *Mind Ripper* follows in the great tradition of movie monsters by letting the audience bond with the monster before dispatching it.

But then, even Jim himself is out to kill Thor and all sense of empathy and compassion disappears. Maybe if *Mind Ripper* had more assiduously followed this angle of the storyline, it could have overcome its two-dimensional, derivative thinking and found a place outside of its *Alien*-inspired trappings.

Witchboard 3: The Possession * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: David Nerman (Brian); Locky Lambert (Julie); Cedric Smith (Francis); Donna Sarrasin (Lisa); Danette Mackay (Dora); Addison Bell (Finch); Richard Zeman (Ronald); Bernard Bougault (Brian Demon Double); Renee Madeleine Le Guerrier (Female Paramedic); Cas Anvar (Paramedic #1); Gwen Talbart (Newscaster); John Moore (Reporter).

CREW: Republic Pictures Presents a Telescene Communications Production, a film by Peter Svatek. *Casting:* Andrea Kenyon. *Special Effects:* Jean Lafleur. *Production Designer:* Richard Tasse. *Music:* Richard Gregoire. *Film Editor:* Denis Papillon. *Director of Photography:* Barry Gravelle. *Co-Producer:* Danny Rossner. *Executive Producers:* Paul Painter, Walter Josten, Jeff Geoffray. *Written by:* Kevin S. Tenney and John Ezrine. *Story by:* Jon Ezrine. *Produced by:* Robin Spry. *Directed by:* Peter Svatek. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A down-on-his-luck commodities broker named Brian (Nerman) gets desperate after losing his house and his car, and with the help of his Satanist landlord, Redman (Smith), gambles on the world of the supernatural. He uses an ancient Sumerian witchboard to get advice about the stock market, unaware that Francis is paving the way to "leverage" and "possess" Brian in the spiritual equivalent of a hostile takeover. Redman—now in Brian's body—commits to a mission to impregnate Brian's beautiful wife Julie (Lambert) with a demon child. Soon, Julie grows suspicious that Brian seems to be a "new man" and learns the truth from Redman's ex-wife, Dora (Mackay).

COMMENTARY: So ... ever speculate how a pre- White House Hillary Rodham Clinton, with just \$1,000 balance in her bank account, turned an initial investment in cattle futures into \$6,300 overnight? Or how, in ten months of trading, the inexperienced trader and future First Lady made nearly \$100,000?⁵⁸

Well, if you have considered those questions, the 1995 horror sequel *Witchboard 3: The Possession* offers one possible solution ... and it isn't just unethical insider trading. Its demonic intervention facilitated by an ancient Sumerian Ouija board. Surprisingly, right-

wing ideologue and Clinton hater Rush Limbaugh never suggested this on his popular radio show.

In *Witchboard 3: The Possession* a commodities trader named Brian (Nerman), known in derogatory terms by associates as "Wonder Trader," leverages and loses his house and car but is still desperate to get back in the game. Commodities trading is a tough gig, Brian insists, "especially if you're stupid enough to use your own money."

Well, this time around, Brian is stupid enough to use his own body as collateral after acquiring and losing \$50,000 from a malevolent loan shark. Eventually Brian has to pay up for his new-found wealth (a half-a-million dollars): his body is possessed by a demon who wants to plant his seed in Brian's gorgeous wife, Julie (Lambert).

The economic sub-text of *Witchboard 3: The Possession* is a near-perfect reflection of the mid- 1990s economic doldrums preceding the dot.com revolution later in the decade. From 1992 to 1994, America found itself in a deep economic recession, and people were losing their jobs in a catastrophic round of firings. These firings, however, were euphemistically re-named "down-sizing" so as not to make corporations sound totally evil.

During this span, many entrepreneurs sought new, get-rich-quick schemes, and even authorized agents of banks went wild, speculating with other people's money in an unauthorized manner. Rogue traders such as Nick Leeson (who lost his employer, Baring Banks, something on the order of 1.3 billion dollars) were, essentially, high-stakes gamblers given the keys to huge movers and shakers in the global economy.

What *Witchboard 3: The Possession* suggests is that wealth built on gambling is no wealth at all. For a while, Brian and Julie enjoy a new car, fancy jewelry, revelry at fancy restaurants and the like, but all of this is a fantasy life built on shifting sand. Trading is risky behavior—the same as gambling—and before long Brian is down: trapped inside mirrors and the reflecting glass of framed photos while the formerly-helpful demon takes over his life.

In diagramming the illicit rise and fall of Brian "The Wonder Trader," *Witchboard 3: The Possession* comments on a new and dangerous twist in the American dream: the belief that you can get something for nothing, and not pay the piper (and not pay a spiritual cost for your avarice).

Witchboard 3: The Possession is buttressed by a strong central performance by David Nerman as both the gambler Brian and the demon who possesses his body for the latter half of the film. Nerman

captures our sympathy as the desperate Brian, and then generates significant menace as the film's villain. It's fun to watch him go from hustling, I'll-try-anything loser to slicked-up Gordon Gecko.

There are resonances of *Rosemary's Baby* in *The Possession*, as unfortunate Julie dreams of being seduced and raped by a hairy devil, and later finds strange marks on her back. Stylistically, the film mounts its genre touches with a modicum of style, but not overkill. There's some swooping Demon-cam; a few goofy looking "soul transitions" (in which Brian flies through the Ouija board planchette) and even a final act demonic presence that at times looks frightening and on other occasions appears ... rubbery.

But *Witchboard 3*'s strength is not in genu-flecting to horror classics and not in the deployment of cinematic tricks. Rather, this sequel succeeds by keeping focus tightly on the current economic climate in America. Coupled with Nerman's strong work, this context makes for a meaningful and relevant story of a man who risks too much, and whose family pays the price for his gambling.

William Bennett could really learn a lesson from watching this horror movie.

***Xtro 3: Watch the Skies* ^{1/2} (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Sal Lindi (Kirns); Karen Moncrieff (Watkins); David M. Parks (Reilly); Jim Hanks (Friedman); Andrea Lauren Herz (Banta); Andrew Divoff (Fetterman); Robert Culp (Guardino); Jeanne Mori (Erica Stern); Al Ruscio (The General); David Weinenger (Segall); Lisa London (Melissa Meed).

CREW: Dorian Inc. Presents *Xtro 3: Watch the Skies*. *Casting:* Linda Francis, Craig Campobasso. *Creature Design and Effects:* David Barton. *Costume Designer:* Carin Berger. *Music:* Van Rieber. *Film Editor:* Krish Mani. *Production Designer:* Wendy Guidery. *Director of Photography:* Irv Goodnoff. *Story by:* Harry Bromley-Davenport, Daryl Haney. *Co-Producer:* Jamie Beadsley. *Produced by:* Michael Biber. *Written by:* Daryl Haney. *Produced and directed by:* Harry Bromley-Davenport. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A platoon of American soldiers under the direction of Major Kirns (Lindi) is assigned a strange job: to clear live ammo from an abandoned island two-hundred miles off the coast, one that hasn't been used by the U.S. Army for nearly forty years. As Kirns soon learns, however, the island was the site of a UFO landing in 1955, and army experiments were conducted on extra-terrestrials there that might rightly be considered torture. Encased in cement, the alien ship and occupants are still present on the island, and angry at their treatment at the hands of the humans. Kirns watches as his people dwindle, under attack by a malevolent alien.

COMMENTARY: If the second *Xtro* movie concerned itself with emulating Jim Cameron's *Aliens* (1986), then *Xtro 3* is concerned with the exploitation of *Predator* (1987), mock-doc *Alien Autopsy: Fact or Fiction* (1995) and Chris Carter's TV phenom, *The X-Files*. With a title harking back to the 1950s, *Watch the Skies* adopts the jungle location of McTiernan's film, as well as the titular alien's ability to "cloak" itself, plus the latter two productions' obsession with alien life, government conspiracies, and the secret existence of extra terrestrials.

Xtro 3 is a time capsule of 1995 because of these influences, but still a pretty wretched film. The moral of the venture, which seems timely today, especially after incidents at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, is that America shouldn't torture its prisoners—Al Qaeda or E.T—because our bad behavior will boomerang and provoke similar bad behavior in our enemies. Here, the aliens, having been tortured, inflict brutal torture on American soldiers too. They do so with alien surgical instruments, giant spider-webs, and excreted goop/acid that burns off layers of human epidermis.

Despite this interesting theme, *Xtro 3* is just, well, weird. The deserted island is inhabited by two species: the angry extra-terrestrials looking to repay brutality with brutality and, for some reason, little white bunnies. The aliens, as rubbery as they plainly appear, look more animated and real than the stuffed animal rabbits which are always underfoot.

And what's up with the design of the alien spaceship here? It's a long, phallic shaft with, at the rear, two testicle-like engine bulbs. This isn't a joke: the alien ship (also ribbed for her pleasure) looks like a giant erect penis, and you have to wonder if it was a deliberate "FU" from the effects department to the film's producers.

The X-Files often dealt with secret military knowledge of alien landings, particularly the Roswell encounter of 1947. *Xtro 3*, in similar fashion, posits an alien landing in nearby Arizona in 1955, and the

military's secret knowledge of it. At film's end, Major Kirns is hauled away as a lunatic, disavowed for his knowledge of the extra-terrestrials. *Xtro 3* fails to add anything new to this subplot and it feels as rote as the war clichés the movie trots out with such regularity.

Perhaps the saddest aspect of *Xtro 3: Watch the Skies* involves the great actor, Robert Culp. In the 1960s, Culp starred in a number of great *Outer Limits* episodes, and he is also remembered fondly from the 1980s for his starring role as Bill Maxwell on *The Greatest American Hero*. He deserves better than his role here, as Colonel Guardino. He just sits behind his desk the entire movie, in what appears to be an airplane hanger, talking to voices on a telephone and issuing Kirns his orders. One wishes Culp could have had the career renaissance in the 1990s that fellow *Outer Limits* alum Martin Landau experienced.

Like the *Second Encounter*, *Watch the Skies* appears to share no continuity with the original *Xtro* (1983), save for behind the scenes in the person of director Harry Bromley Davenport. As of this writing, *Watch the Skies* is also the final film in the franchise.

1996

February 10:

IBM's Deep Blue computer defeats chess champion Garry Kasparov, a watershed in the development of computer intelligence.

March 19:

Brothers Lyle and Erik Menendez are found guilty in the shotgun-murder of their own parents. They are sentenced to life in prison on July 2nd.

June 25:

The Khobar Towers Bombing in Saudi Arabia takes the life of nineteen American servicemen. This is an early strike by Al-Qaeda.

June 27:

At the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, a bomb set by a right-wing domestic terrorist, Eric Rudolph, goes off in Centennial Park, killing one and injuring nearly a dozen more.

July 5:

Dolly the sheep, the first mammal to be successfully cloned from adult cells, is born in Scotland.

August 23:

Islamic terrorist Osama bin Laden calls for the removal of all American military forces from sacred sites in Saudi Arabia.

August 26:

Bill Clinton signs the Welfare Reform Act.

August 28:

Prince Charles and Princess Diana are officially divorced.

November 6:

In the 1996 presidential election, Bill Clinton decisively wins a second term. He defeats former Senate majority leader Bob Dole. The final tally in the Electoral College: 379–159.

December 26:

Child beauty pageant contestant Jon Benet Ramsey is found murdered in her Colorado home. Her parents are immediately branded as suspects and become pariahs in the United States.

***The Arrival* * * ***

Critical Reception

"This cautionary tale has a doom-laden, apocalyptic mood, but works well-enough as a paranoid thriller under the guidance of writer-director David Twohy."—Paul Meehan, *Saucer Movies*, Scarecrow Press, 1998, page 283

Cast and Crew

CAST: Charlie Sheen (Zane Zaminsky); Lindsay Crouse (Ilana Green); Teri Polo (Char); Richard Schiff (Calvin); Leon Rippy (DOD #1); Tony T. Johnson (Kiki); Ron Silver (Phil Gordian); Alan Coates (Terraformer)

CREW: Live Entertainment Presents a Steelwork Films/Thomas

G. Smith Film. A Film by David Twohy. *Casting*: Mary Jo Slater. Steven Brooksbank. *Costume Designer*: Mayes C. Rubeo. *Visual Effects Supervisor*: Charles L. Finance. *Executive Producer*: Tod Field, Robert W. Cort. *Film Editor*: Martin Hunter. *Music*: Arthur Kempel. *Production Designer*: Michael Novotny. *Director of Photography*: Hiro Narita. *Co-Producer*: Cyris Yavneh. *Produced by*: Thomas G. Smith. *Written and Directed by*: David Twohy. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 110 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Radio astronomer Zane Zaminsky (Sheen) is certain he has discovered an extra-terrestrial signal, one emanating from Wolf 336, but very soon forces at NASA and the Department of Defense do everything possible to discredit him and his discovery. Peering further into the mystery, Zane realizes malevolent aliens are already on Earth ... and in positions of significant power. They are "jump starting" the global warming process to make the planet more to their liking, but Zane hopes to expose one of their leaders, NASA's Phil Gordian (Silver), to the world. Unfortunately, the aliens are on to Zane and his girl-friend Char (Polo) and plan to use a devastating weapon against them.

COMMENTARY: Don't watch the skies; watch your back. The aliens are already here and well on the way to completing a sinister agenda in the paranoid and thrilling *The Arrival*. The aliens control the levers of government (including NASA), are secretly re-shaping our planet to their liking, and they mercilessly put down anyone who discovers their secret using everything from poisonous scorpions to matter-devouring black hole bombs.

In vetting this nightmare scenario, *The Arrival* hits all the hot spots of 1990s horror cinema. It features alien invaders arriving in secret, and there's a giant conspiracy in alliance with an international big bad business, called "Planet Corp. Industries." The company claims to be a "leader in clean air technology." You know, just like BP.

There's even an element of science run amok in *The Arrival*, with the aliens terra-forming our planet to their liking, and more.

Twohy's movie proves remarkably forwardthinking, even prescient, by citing global warming as a looming environmental crisis, the bugaboo of the next decade, the 2000s. Here, the aliens are changing the very nature of the planet, continuing a process mankind

has already begun. With almost Cheney-esque resolve, the aliens are blasé about the disastrous climate change.

"We're just finishing what you started" the alien leader, Ron Silver, tells Charlie Sheen's human hero. "If you can't tend to your own planet, none of you deserve to live here."

How's that for an environmental message? To back it up with visuals, one scene in *The Arrival* shows an outcropping of green flora and fauna growing in the white Arctic, the canary in the coal mine of global warming, or "the window on the future" as the film suggests.

Commendably, this movie doesn't spare on revealing the details and machinery of the alien plan, either. *The Arrival* escorts a human being into the heart of the alien conspiracy, and the most impressive and tense scene in the film involves Zane (Sheen) infiltrating a Planet Corp. installation and discovering a multi-level facility that would put the Krell to shame. He also sees the aliens in their true, malevolent-seeming form. The sets, make-up and special effects are top-notch, and everything is forged in believable, paranoid fashion.

Action-packed, intelligent and downright scary, *The Arrival* ends up by being optimistic about human nature. Zane reveals the nature of the alien threat by recording a conversation with Silver and passing it to all the major news outlets.

The belief is that, once armed with knowledge, humans would stop the alien invasion and global warming.

More likely they'd get a government grant to build another installation.

***Bad Moon* * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Mariel Hemingway (Janet); Michael Pare (Ted); Mason Gamble (Brett); Ken Pogue (Sheriff Jensen); Hrothgar Mathews (Flopsy); Johanna Marlow Lebovitz (Marjorie); Gavin Buhr (Forest Ranger); Julia Montgomery Brown (Reporter); Primo (Thor).

CREW: Warner Bros., Morgan Creek Productions and James G. Robinson Present an Eric Red film. *Casting:* Michelle Allen, Tori Herald. *Music:* Daniel Licht. *Co-Producer:* Jacobus Rose. *Film Editor:* C. Timothy O'Meara. *Production Designer:* Richard Paris, Linda Del

Rosario. *Director of Photography*: Jan Kiesser. *Executive Producer*: Gary Barber, Bill Todman, Jr. *Based on the novel* *Thor* by: Wayne Smith. *Produced by*: James G. Robinson. *Written for the screen and directed by*: Eric Red. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 79 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An explorer in a remote jungle, Ted (Pare), is bitten by a ferocious werewolf before returning home to the States, where he visits his sister, Janet (Hemingway), her son, Brett (Gamble), and the family pet, a noble German shepherd named Thor (Primo). There are a series of animal attacks in the neighborhood and the authorities suspect a grizzly bear, but Thor knows the truth about Ted: he has succumbed to the curse of the werewolf. After Thor attacks Ted, Janet has a local animal control team take the dog into custody, an act that endangers the family, especially as Ted's behavior grows more bizarre and vicious.

COMMENTARY: If *Old Yeller* (1957) were a horror movie, it might look a lot like 1996's *Bad Moon*, which concerns, primarily, a courageous dog defending its human family against a vicious werewolf.

True, the dog in *Old Yeller* died and Thor, the canine protagonist of *Bad Moon*, survives, but still, this boy-and-his-dog genre movie is oddly affecting and unusually effective.

Since Thor is the star and hero of *Bad Moon*, this is a movie that doesn't rely much on dialogue to tell its story. Instead, director Red's deft camera spends much time focusing on the dog and his viewpoint, and ultimately it's time well-spent. Early on, there's a touching scene in which the loyal dog makes his nightly rounds, checking on his wards (Mom and Brett), before going downstairs to his little carpet and going to sleep. This establishes, more than dialogue could, the dog's role in the family as protector.

And after Thor's first battle with the werewolf, he returns to Brett's bed and sits down across the boy's stomach, in an instinctive, protective position. This is the line, the dog seems to declare, and viewers are left to wonder if there is any better friend to man than a dog.

The dog is the first to discover the werewolf, and when he finds out that Ted is a monster, Red cuts — without tongue-in-cheek, to a

reaction shot: a close-up of the dog's furrowed brow. Looking at Thor, you'd swear the pet is feeling a swirl of emotion: sorrow that Ted has become dangerous and more than a little bit of worry. He knows at that moment that he'll have to kill him.

Ted knows it too, and this results in a literal pissing contest between dog and werewolf. On one hand, this is extremely funny: Ted pissing in a doghouse, Thor urinating on Ted's RV. But again, the movie plays it straight all the way. This is a battle over territory between two male animals.

Later in the film, you may find yourself feeling sad for Thor after Ted tricks him into attacking him, and it takes two employees from animal control (with harnesses) to remove Thor from the family house. You want to scream at Janet that she's made a terrible mistake as the loyal dog is dragged away in restraints, howling at the betrayal ... and the looming danger. Ted even waves victoriously at the dog.

Finally, in the mortal battle between werewolf and dog, Thor again proves his worth. He goes at that monster with everything he's got (his 105 lbs to the wolf's 250 lbs). The movie pulls no punches either: you see Thor bloodied and bruised as the fight gets truly vicious. Thor's final assault in the movie is one of self-sacrifice—pushing the wolf (and himself) through a glass second story window into the yard below. For a horrible instant, seeing Thor's body on his side, you're afraid he's dead.

And Thor fights this battle for a simple stroke or pet from his masters and the compliment, "good dog."

I've probably succumbed to mankind's maudlin tendency to anthropomorphize animals here, but perhaps I can be forgiven. After so many serial killers, interlopers, self-reflexive slashers and post-modern horror movies in the 1990s, it's nice to experience a lean, mean movie about a true-blue dog doing battle with a slobbering, irredeemable monster.

In truth, *Bad Moon* is simply a good old-fashioned horror movie. The film's prologue literally features a golden oldie: the coitus interruptus, as a giant werewolf attacks Ted and his lover in the midst of very realistic-looking sex. Before the act is done, the werewolf rips the lady apart, and Pare—bitten—blows off the head of the wolf with a shotgun. That's what I call efficiency. Sex, violence and gore all before the first five minutes are over.

Bad Moon gives good werewolf, all right. Ted's transformation is vetted using a combination of time-lapse photography and CGI and its visually-intriguing, if not entirely real-looking. And the kills are absolutely brutal, even if silly. For instance, a forest ranger is out

working in the woods in the middle of the night when attacked by the werewolf. His car isn't even nearby. Was he working overtime? It hardly matters, because his murder is so startlingly rendered (wolf jaws snap over his hard hat, crushing it as blood fountains out) you forgive the film the trespasses in plausibility.

At 79 minutes, *Bad Moon* has no aspirations to do anything other than really scare you and make you sympathize with that beautiful canine. It's the simple story of a boy, his loyal dog, and a monstrous werewolf.

A philosopher once stated, "The greatest truths are the simplest." So likewise are the greatest B movies.

Cemetery Man **(a.k.a. *Dellamorte Dellamore*) * * * ***

Critical Reception

"Despite its boldness, *Cemetery Man* falls considerably short of being a masterpiece. The film runs out of comic momentum about two-thirds of the way through, and has to lurch and stumble towards the finish line. Soavi can only sustain the humor for so long before it becomes repetitive. *Cemetery Man* never really ends—it just stops, and the scenes leading up to the closing credits are easily the movie's weakest. If you left the film twenty minutes early, you wouldn't miss much."—James Berardinelli, *Reel Views*, http://www.reelviews.net/movies/c/cemetery_man.html

"Usually, comedy and horror are mutually exclusive; it's hard to stay scared while giggling. The difficulty of that combination may explain the nearly worldwide flop of 1994's *Cemetery Man*, an uncharacteristically funny zombie movie from Dario Argento apprentice Michele Soavi. The film (originally titled *Della -morte Dellamore*) found an audience in Soavi's native Italy, but floundered everywhere else, rejected as too funny, too bloody, or both. But it's enjoyed a lively underground following in America, with good reason; few films have tried so enthusiastically to fuse horror and humor, while still saying something about life."—Tasha Robinson, *The A.V. Club*, June 21, 2006, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/cemetery-man,8897/>

"Perhaps the last of the great Italian zombie cycle, this is a quirky little gem with a dark sense of humor and eroticism galore. The gorgeous Anna Falchi provides the eroticism, while a then-unknown Rupert Everett appears as a shockingly matter-of-fact ghoul killer. One of the decade's most underrated horror films."— Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Rupert Everett (Francesco Dellamorte); François Hadji-Lazaro (Gnaghi); Anna Falchi (She); Mickey Knox (Marshall); Clive Riche (Dr. Verseci); Fabiana Formica (Valentina); Katja Anton (Claudio's Girlfriend); Barbara Cupisti (Magda); Pietro Genuardi (Mayor Civardi); Anton Alexander (Franco); Patrizia Punzo (Claudio's Mom); Stefano Masciarelli (Mayor Scanarotti)

CREW: Studio/Canal and Michele Ray Gavras Present a K.G. Production, a French-Italo Co-production, a Uvana Film, in collaboration with Silvio Berlusconi communications, a Bibò TV and Film Production of a Michele Soavi Film. *Costume Designers:* Alfonsina Lettieri, Maurizio Millennotti. *Production Designer:* Massimo Geleng. *Film Editor:* Franco Fraticelli. *Music:* Riccardo Biseo, Manuel De Sica. *Director of Photography:* Mauro Marchetti. *Produced by:* Heinz Bibò, Tilde Corsi, Giovanni Romoli. *Written by:* Giovanni Romoli. *From the book by:* Tiziano Sclavi. *Executive producers:* Conchita Airoidi, Dino Dionisio. *Directed by:* Michele Soavi. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Francesco Dellamorte (Everett) works at a cemetery in which "Returners"—zombies—rise from the grave seven nights after their burial. He dispatches the zombies with his dim-witted, overweight assistant, Gnaghi (Hadji-Lazaro) and then, one day, falls in love with a beautiful widow (Falchi). On the night they consummate their love, however, her husband returns from the grave a zombie and kills her, sending Dellamorte into a tailspin of depression and rage.

COMMENTARY: The heart wants what the heart wants, and the heart's desire doesn't always make sense.

Sometimes, for instance, what the heart wants is the companionship and love of a zombified, severed head.

That's just one of the core ideas underlying *Cemetery Man*, a gorgeous, poetic horror-comedy splatter fest from Dario Argento protégé Michele Soavi. Although ostensibly a zombie picture set in Buffalora Cemetery, the movie is actually about the vicissitudes and needs of the human heart, which, oddly enough, seem to survive death itself.

In an accomplished, sophisticated performance, Rupert Everett portrays Francesco, the "watchman" of Buffalora. It's his job to put down the "returners" (zombies). Yet his pulse hardly seems to quicken in the nightly ritual of shooting zombies.

Rather, Francesco adopts a "life goes on," work-a-day approach to the bloody task (which, at one point, is termed "the daily grind.") He doesn't care if this is an invasion of zombies or not, he's just doing what needs to be done. Indeed, the movie generates significant laughter from the fact that neither Francesco nor the townspeople question in any way the reality of the zombies, or the reasons behind their return.

But then, one day, Francesco falls in love with a lovely widow (Falchi). They have sex, but her zombie husband interrupts, and kills her. Suddenly life and death are indeed matters of great concern to Francesco. He finds he can't do without his new lover, and soon, every woman he encounters seems a reflection of his lost love. This is made literal by Soavi's choice to have Falchi play three roles in the film.

In every woman, Francesco sees the face of his loss.

Before long, Francesco has grown melancholy over life and death, and the film makes philosophical hay over comments such as "the living dead and the dying living are the same thing." Or "we're born merely to die." What this means is that *Cemetery Man* is an existential drama about the things that make life meaningful to the living. In the case of Francesco, that thing is love.

Francesco's trials are mirrored in large part by the subplot involving his strange assistant, Gnaghi, who falls in love with the severed head of a dead girl, the mayor's daughter. She has been laid to rest in a glass top coffin in Buffalora and so Gnaghi waits patiently each night for her ascent from the grave. A cynical Francesco tells him that the "waiting is the best part," the anticipation of love the very thing that makes the experience of love so grand. Gnaghi eventually gets his bride, and experiences a spell of bliss with her.

In the last portion of the film, Francesco goes off the rails, and

begins killing living people, having apparently given up on such meaningless distinctions as "dead" or "alive." His experience in the cemetery has reinforced a belief that they are two sides of the same coin. "I'd give my life to be dead," he notes, humorously. At least then, he'd be with his love, right?

Cemetery Man ends with Francesco and Gnaghi attempting to flee town, and running right off the road to nowhere, like they've reached the edge of the movie's universe itself. We soon see that they are inside a snow globe of sorts, though nobody utters the word "rosebud."

What does this ending mean? Perhaps just that we all live in self-contained universes, pulling close those things that matter to us, and hoping to drive away the things that threaten us.

Cemetery Man is whimsically macabre and sexy. There's never been a zombie film like it, and Soavi adopts the best features of his movie hero, Terry Gilliam, and that wizard of the blood flood, Sam Raimi. What the audience ends up with is a dizzying meditation on the thought I opened this review with. That the heart wants what the heart wants, sometimes irrationally, and in direct contravention of the laws of life and death.

"We all do what we can not to think about life," Francesco notes early in the film, but this is not a criticism one can level at *Cemetery Man*. To its credit, issues of life, love and their place in our "personal" universe are foremost on the movie's mind.

***Children of the Corn IV: The Gathering* * * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Naomi Watts (Grace Rhodes); Karen Black (June Rhodes); Brent Jennings (Donald Atkins); Samaria Graham (Marry Anne); Jamie Renee Smith (Margaret Rhodes); Brandon Kleyla (Josiah); William Windom (Doc Larson); Salle Ellis (Jane Nock); Mariette Marich (Rosa Nock); Joshua Patterson (Scott McClellan); Kay Bower (Janet McClellan); Evan Greenwalt (Convulsive Boy); Adam Lidberg (Michael); Libby Villar (Michael); Bill Prael (Concerned Father); Stephen Earnhart (Wilks); Jim Krieg (Smits); Richard Grass (Sheriff Briggs).

CREW: Dimension Film Presents a Film by Greg Spence. *Casting:*

Donald Paul Pemrick. *Music*: David Williams. *Film Editor*: Chris Cibelli. *Production Designer*: Adele Plaque. *Associate Producer*: Jake Eberle. *Director of Photography*: Richard Clabaugh. *Based on the Short Story by*: Stephen King. *Produced by*: Gary Depew. *Written by*: Stephen Berger, Greg Spence. *Directed by*: Greg Spence. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Grace (Watts), a medical student, returns home to Grand Island, Nebraska, to care for her sick mother, June (Black). Before long, the children of the town are overcome with a mysterious fever: a harbinger of an old evil from the cornfield. Soon, Grace's daughter, Margaret (Smith), is among the sick being possessed by evil spirits.

COMMENTARY: Of all the seemingly-endless *Children of the Corn* DTV sequels, *The Gathering* is the best. In part, that might have something to do with lead actress Naomi Watts, who in the twenty-first century would move on to such A-list fare as David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and the American remake of *Ringu*, titled *The Ring* (2002).

Watts is not only a talented actress, but one who seems able to inject even dire material with a real sense of human interest. Watts universally invests herself in the proceedings of her films, and that's true even in the fourth, totally unnecessary, *Children of the Corn* movie.

And actually, *The Gathering* seems to share some critical thematic points with *The Ring* saga. There's an evil child spirit on the loose (Josiah here; Samara there), a child of questionable parentage (Margaret here; Aidan and Samara there), a family secret, and the aforementioned presence of Naomi Watts. A well even plays an important role in both tales.

The Gathering is in no way as good as *The Ring* (2002), but it is illuminating to note that Watts travels through many of the same paces investigating the supernatural here as she does in her more famous role. Consider *The Gathering* a dry run for *The Ring*, I guess.

Children of the Corn IV wisely discards *Urban Harvest's* contrived storyline about contaminated corn being transported globally and takes the tack that an old sin can bring about a new evil and that (as in *The Ring*) evil can be transmitted from person to person. Thus this entry in the *Children of the Corn* saga has very little to do with any of

the other films, but functions well as a standalone, which is refreshing, since, overall, the other franchise films are all pretty lousy. The supernatural plague aspect somehow makes this film feel less dated than the specter of Amish children wielding sickles and making religious converts, while an underground boll weevil attacks in the cornfield.

Unlike the other DTV sequels, *The Gathering* also looks like a legitimate work of the cinema rather than a production thrown together for video, using TV-style framing and shooting. The superior production design, the canny choice of shots and compositions, and even the music all contribute here to an aura of doom as a fever of unknown origin begins to infect children. There are plenty of shots of sick children, writhing in bed in agony, and that's a creepy, unpleasant thing.

Although *The Gathering* relies much too heavily on "The Stay Awake" convention (a character sitting up suddenly in bed, usually sweaty, after a nightmare) for its jolts and jumps, the idea of a supernatural sickness (based on an old crime) is interesting, and a relief from all the pseudo-religious claptrap of the other *Children of the Corn* movies. No one will ever make the mistake that *The Gathering* is a great movie, but you won't hate yourself for spending time with it. Or with Naomi Watts.

Thssse Craft * * *

Critical Reception

"The 1990s was one of the decades that saw the rise of media depictions of the supernatural aimed at a teenage audience. Witchcraft has served as one of the features of this supernaturalism, and although a variety of differing depictions of the Witch persist, *The Craft* paralleled pop culture in Witchcraft's shifting demo-graphics. Scholars have discussed the growing teenage interest in Witchcraft, and with the technical input of an actual Witch *The Craft* serves as a complex depiction of teen Witches. A tale of teenage angst is complemented with the issues of belonging, exclusion, peer groups, female empowerment, physical appearance, and the appropriate and inappropriate uses of magic. *The Craft* should be considered must see for those interested in a post-feminist journey into pop

culture's depiction of Witchcraft and the teenage female."—John W. Morehead, *TheoFantastique*

"Before Harry Potter, legions of teenage girls took an interest in witchery thanks to this stylish flick about a coven of nubile young sorceresses-in-training. Fairuza Balk is truly foreboding as the lead heavy."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Robin Tunney (Sarah); Fairuza Balk (Nancy Downs); Neve Campbell (Bonnie); Rachel True (Rochelle); Christine Taylor (Laura); Skeet Ulrich (Chris Hooker); Assumpta Serna (Lirio); Cliff De Young (Sarah's Dad); Breckin Meyer (Mitt); Helen Shaver (Grace).

CREW: Columbia Pictures presents a Douglas Wick Production, a film by Andrew Fleming. *Costume Designer:* Deborah Everton. *Music:* Graeme Revell. *Film Editor:* Jeff Freeman. *Production Designer:* Marek Dobrowolski. *Director of Photography:* Alexander Gruszynski. *Executive Producer:* Ginny Nugent. *Written by:* Peter Filardi, Andrew Fleming. *Story by:* Peter Filardi. *Produced by:*



A teenage séance in *The Craft* (1996). Left to right: Rachel True, Fairuza Balk, Robin Tunney, and Neve Campbell.

Douglas Wick. *Directed by:* Andrew Fleming. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running*

time: 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Sarah (Tunney) attends a new school in L.A. and falls in with a group of high school witches, Nancy (Balk), insecure Bonnie (Campbell) and Rochelle (True). After a field trip in which they summon the supernatural, they gain frightening new powers and abilities. But the power trip turns negative when members of the coven use their powers to right personal grievances.

COMMENTARY: The teen culture of the 1990s was buffeted by a number of contradictory influences during the Clinton era. The brave new world opened by the Internet offered the beginnings of a technological sense of community, even as some teenagers felt more separated than ever from their parents, their parents' beliefs, and even nature itself.

The old ways weren't necessarily working anymore for many maturing Gen X'ers and Y'ers, and some teens sought meaning in new alternative belief systems that seemed more appealing, and most importantly, less judgmental. One of those alternatives was, interestingly enough, witchcraft:

For many young women of the 1990s, teenage Witchcraft offered a social and spiritual identification that "enchanted" their corporeality and concerns: feminism, environmentalism and New Age discourses brought together without the "undesirable" connotations of each individually.⁵⁹

Traditional witchcraft (or Wiccanism, or Paganism) re-interpreted in a non-threatening way fostered a spiritual connection to the Earth, promoted girl power, rejected patriarchy and offered a belief system not dependent on binary Christian concepts like Heaven or Hell, good or evil. Christians didn't like it, however, since the practice of Wicca rejected Christianity and didn't believe in such concepts as "demons."

Hollywood contributed strongly to the presentation of witchcraft as a valid spiritual alternative, especially for girls. The 1990s brought TV series concerning witches including *Sabrina: The Teenage Witch* (1996–2003), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *Charmed*

(1998–2006).

At theaters, movies such as *Practical Magic* (1998), *Simply Irresistible* (1999) and this film, *The Craft* (1996), also depicted the Wiccan belief system in a mostly romantic, positive fashion. In these films, witches were powerful, connected to their peers and to their planet, and capable of reshaping reality to their desires and needs.

In real life there was a popular "un-grounding" spell that was reputed to work on punishment-prone parents, and in *The Craft*, there were "glamour" spells that could cover bad skin ... not just third-degree burns as in the case of *The Craft's* Bonnie, but acne and other blemishes. What teenager wouldn't be interested in that?

Furthermore, the witchcraft of *The Craft* promises an antidote to the out-of-control highschool athletic culture of the times (embodied by the Glen Ridge rapists and the members of the Spur Posse). Here, football player Chris Hooker (Skeet Ulrich) lies to everyone at school about having sex with Sarah (Robin Tunney), ruining her reputation in the process. Not only did she have sex with him, he says, she was bad in bed ... the ultimate putdown. Not only is she slutty; she's bad at it. But after developing her Wiccan abilities, Sarah turns the tables by turning Chris into an adoring lapdog, one who sits and stands on her command.

These aren't the only wrongs that the witch-craft corrects. Racism is addressed too. Rochelle (True) is confronted by Laura (Christine Taylor) in ugly terms. She tells the African American, "I don't like Negroids." One spell later, and Laura's prized blonde hair is falling out in clumps.

Ultimately, the coven becomes so powerful that it takes over center stage in high school. In a slow-montage we see the powerful female four-some stride the corridors, the world their oyster. What's a little funny about this is that when they invoke "the spirit," the girls all identify it as male.

"He fills you," they say, making it a sexual connotation and putting even their own fearsome power in the hands of a man. Also, it's a little funny how the four women all broach their non-conformity: by conforming to each other's fashion sense. When they hop a bus on a field trip, they're all depicted wearing dark sun-glasses and wearing identical fashions. They've made their own clique no doubt, but within the clique, identity is still dictated by group think.

The message of *The Craft* is ultimately the same as *Spider-Man's* (2002): with great power comes great responsibility. Revenge isn't justice, and "whatever you send out, you get back three-fold," according to the script. Furthermore the "only good or bad is in the

heart of the witch."

What this means is that Sarah learns a painful lesson: Wicca is just another club, like the football team, and her fellow girls in the coven are just as selfish, as callow, as self-obsessed as the men they have beaten and dominated. Sarah only finds true power alone, when she is an individual and not part of a club.

In this way, the message of *The Craft* has often been misperceived, especially by frightened Christian parents. The movie doesn't endorse witchcraft. It notes that witchcraft, when applied judgmentally and capriciously, is simply a romantic deception, as debauched as America's worship of the athlete culture.

In some ways, *The Craft* signals America about something brewing in its pop culture—an acknowledgment that traditional belief systems aren't cutting it, that the old ways don't hold the currency and authority they did even a decade earlier, especially for women. But the film is no fawning depiction of witchcraft as religious dogma, especially since three of the witches prove dramatically evil.

On the contrary, the film suggests that real power comes from individuality. Sarah is called a natural witch, one whose "power comes from within."

In that way, *The Craft* is an affirmation of self-esteem and non-conformity, a good message and a good movie.

The Dentist * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Corbin Bernsen (Alan Feinstone); Linda Hoffman (Brooke); Molly Hagan (Jessica); Ken Foree (Detective Gibbs); Virginia Koehne (Sarah); Patty Toy (Karen); Jan Hoag (Candy); Lise Simms (Paula Roberts); Michael Stadvec (Matt); Christopher Kriesa (Mr. Schaeffer); Joanne Baron (Mrs.Saunders); Christa Sauls (April Reign); Mark Ruffalo (Steve Lander); Tony Noaes (Detective Sunshine); Sal Viscuso (Matthew Zeigler); Earl Boen (Marvin Goldblum); Brian McLaughlin (Jody); Brian Yuzna (Attendant); Diana Tashi (Opera Singer).

CREW: A Pierre David/Trimark Pictures Production. A Film by Brian Yuzna. *Casting:* Carol Lefa. *Production Designer:* William V. Ryder. *Special Make-up Supervisor:* Anthony C. Ferrante. *Music:* Alan Howarth. *Film Editor:* Christopher Roth. *Director of Photography:* Levie

Isaacks. *Line Producer*: Robert Lansing Parker. *Co-Producers*: Noel A. Zapitsch, Philip B. Goldfine. *Executive Producer*: Mark Amin. *Produced by*: Pierre David. *Written by*: Dennis Paoli, Stuart Gordon, Charles Finch. *Directed by*: Brian Yuzna. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An affluent dentist with an obsessive compulsive disorder, Dr. Feinstone (Bernsen), learns that his wife is cheating on him with their pool boy and then has a very bad, very violent day at the office. He begins to take out his anger on his staff and his patients, using the tools of the trade to do them grievous bodily harm.

COMMENTARY: The best and most memorable horror movies often concern universal fears, fears that every human being can easily identify with.

Like getting lost in the woods, for instance.

A more modern but no less common fear in our society, however, involves the dentist: a medical professional who sticks sharp surgical instruments into our sensitive mouths. Armed with drills, scalpels, probes and other devices, the dentist truly has us, his patients, at his mercy. And worst of all, when we're sitting in the dentist's chair, with our mouths wide open and exposed, we don't know what kind of a day the dentist has had.

Maybe he's pissed off. Maybe he's up to his neck dealing with his staff. Maybe he's just had a fight with his wife.

Is he going to take out his frustration on your mouth?

Brian Yuzan's *The Dentist* is an interesting showcase of escalating insanity in one particular dentist. Even the first time the audience meets Bernsen's madman, Feinstone, he's unhinged. He describes the "stench of decay" underlying his "perfect white life." He's not talking about teeth, either: he's talking about his wife and her marital betrayal. Feinstone seems to know where he's headed too. "Once that decay gets started it can only lead to rot, corruption...."

And in one day at the office, Feinstone really gets to the rot and corruption. He hurts a little boy named Jody on the boy's first trip to the dentist, making the boy bleed profusely from his mouth after being too rough. Then, the dentist attempts to have sex with a female

patient, April Reign (Sauls), while she is unconscious.

"They're dropping like flies," notes one of the hygienists with worry. Indeed they are.

The Dentist trades not just on universal fears of helplessness in the dentist's chair, but on the increasing cultural sense of anger and victimhood evidenced by many white men during the mid- 1990s.

This was the era during which many right wingers felt that white privilege was seriously being curtailed. White Republican males were angry about guns, gays, big government, taxes and welfare, among other things.

In the election of 1994, President Clinton's party lost fifty-four seats in the House and eight seats in the Senate based on this brewing discontent over his policies such as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and the attempted health care reform.

Ironically, by 1994, Clinton's administration had actually cut the deficit by a quarter billion dollars, eliminated wasteful government programs by the dozen and cut taxes for millions. But because Clinton was a left-leaning Democrat, because of the ascent of right-wing radio programs like those of Rush Limbaugh, the right wing was energized and angry come Election Day 1994.

Unfortunately, even electoral victory did not seem to content the angry fringe. In 1995 the anti-government rhetoric was translated to violent reality with the Oklahoma City Bombing conducted by right-winger Timothy McVeigh. This horrific event has been called "the signature event of a wave of right-wing terrorism that struck America in the 1990s, derived wholly from an ideological stew of venomous hate that has since been seeping into mainstream conservatism."⁶⁰

In *The Dentist*, this unsettling trend of irrational hatred and sense of privilege among some right-leaning whites is on full, ugly display. Dr. Feinstone feels he is being hounded by the government, namely the I.R.S., over the fact that he cheated on his income taxes. He is angry that his wife is having an affair with the pool boy, but he is not exactly a faithful husband, either. There's a deep-seated rage evidenced by the character that he is not being treated fairly, that he is not getting what is coming to him, and that others are victimizing him.

Ultimately, Feinstone does very much what McVeigh did: striking out at those he deems guilty and corrupt, resorting to brutal violence to address his mostly-irrational grievances. Looking at it from another perspective, Feinstone is a millionaire with a thriving medical practice, gorgeous wife, and professional respect. He's hardly a victim

of any entrenched conspiracy to destroy him or re-distribute his wealth.

In tapping everyday fears of the dentist's chair and acknowledging, subtly, the temper of the mid-1990s, *The Dentist* proves itself a clever, gory and well-done horror.

The movie's coda is sort of poetic. Dr. Feinstone is an opera fan, and he is finally apprehended by the police near a woman singing opera on stage. The sound of her beautiful voice disappears and what's left instead is the uncomfortable, grating screech of a dental drill. We then see Feinstone not on stage, but in a cell ... wearing a strait-jacket.

He's gone from doctor to patient, and now that shrill drill is the soundtrack of his life.

Diabolique * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Sharon Stone (Nicole Horner); Isabelle Adjani (Mia Baran); Chazz Palminteri (Guy Baran); Kathy Bates (Shirley Vogel); Spalding Gray (Simon Veatch); Shirley Knight (Edie Danzinga); Donal Logue (Video Photographer 1); J.J. Abrams (Video Photographer 2); Adam Hann-Byrd (Erick); Diana Bellamy (Mrs. Vawz); Irv O'Neal (Compton).

CREW: Warner Bros., Morgan Creek and James G. Robinson present, in association with Marvin Worth productions, a film by Jeremiah Chechik. *Castings:* Jackie Burch. *Costume Designer:* L'Wren Scott. *Music:* Randy Edelman. *Co-Producer:* Gary Daigler. *Executive Producers:* Jerry Offsay, Chuck Binder. *Film Editor:* Carol Littleton. *Production Designer:* Leslie Diley. *Director of Photography:* Peter James. *Executive Producer:* Gary Barber, Bill Todman, Jr. *Written by:* Don Roos. *Produced by:* Marvin Worth, James G. Robinson. *Directed by:* Jeremiah Chechik. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 107 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: At St. Anselm's school for Boys, the principal, ex-nun Mia Baran (Adjani), and the math teacher, Nicole Horner (Stone), plot the murder of Mia's husband, headmaster Guy Baran (Palminteri). Over a long weekend in Philadelphia, the two women lure Guy to Nicole's

rental house, poison his liquor, and drown him in the bathtub. After transporting the corpse back to the campus in a large basket and dumping it in the filthy swimming pool, Mia's heart condition is aggravated by frightening signs that the abusive Guy has returned from the dead. A cancer survivor and ex-cop, Shirley Vogel (Bates), looks into Guy's disappearance, suspecting a conspiracy to commit murder. But who is behind it?

COMMENTARY: H.G Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques* (1955) tops many "best films ever made" lists, even fifty years after its release. Filmed in spare, expressive black-and-white and dominated by fragile characters that might euphemistically be described as "dissolute," Clouzot's early initiative certainly suggested elements of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). Both film classics obsessed on images of decay and death, and both successfully "tricked" the first-time audience about character motivations and the ultimate direction of the narrative.

In *Les Diaboliques* an overwhelming aura of hopelessness blanketed the characters. Poor, wounded, ex-nun Christina (Vera Clouzot) could never escape her husband, Miguel (Paul Meurisse), even after his apparent demise.

And the film's setting, a dilapidated old school, made Christina's inescapable purgatory all the more visceral. In the film's scariest, most influential and frequently imitated scene, the audience witnessed Miguel rise from the dead—in a bathtub—his eyes transformed into the white, unseeing orbs of a zombie. The mere sight of her husband resurrected brought about wife Christina's death by cardiac arrest ... but it was a trick, a ruse.

Deftly directed and entirely anxiety-provoking, *Les Diaboliques* is one of those films in which form reflects content. The original movie is dominated by images of water, of drowning. For example, the film opens with rain splattering in a puddle on hard, broken pavement, the audience's first indication of the "storm" coming. Miguel's false death occurs in a filled bathtub. And then, of course, there's the swimming pool—a much larger bathtub of sorts—and, finally, the climactic return to a bathtub in Christina's apartment. This pervasive water imagery serves to remind audiences that it is actually Christina who is drowning. The whole world is closing around her in a veritable deluge of deceit and treachery.

In the 1990s—an era when remakes of classic horror films were proliferating—director Jeremiah Chechik crafted this extremely literal

remake of *Les Diaboliques*, substituting a contemporary, nineties, "Year of the Woman"-style, feminist context for the film noir context of the original. Here, the narrative more overtly concerns the cycle of domestic violence, of men abusing women, and, in particular, abusing wives.

Even more so, *Diabolique* consciously reflects the lurid, tabloid culture of the Clinton Era, the decade that gave our nation "celebrities" including Amy Fisher and the aptly-named Lorena Bobbitt. The three-ring white-trash daily circus known as *The Jerry Springer Show* also makes a cameo appearance in the film, playing on a television in the background. The message: attempted murder has become part of the sensational language of the culture.

There are long spells in *Diabolique* that serve as line-for-line, moment-to-moment regurgitation of the 1955 film, only in much less effective and much less distinctive color photography. In both versions, the audience gets a sexual innuendo making use of the word "swallow." In particular, Miguel/Guy forces Christina/Mia to swallow bad-tasting food before a dining hall full of onlookers. She nearly gags. The double meaning is much more on-the-nose in the remake since Guy actually says "swallow it for once in your life," to his put-upon spouse.

Similarly, Nicole sports a black eye in both versions of the film, and the bathtub zombie gets resurrected to generally less impact than in the original version.

Where the two iterations of *Diabolique* diverge most meaningfully is in characterization, and climactic action. The first film featured a rumpled detective investigating the disappearance of Miguel. He was a retired commissioner named Alfred Fichet, and he didn't really accomplish much in terms of his investigation. In keeping with the film's hopeless tenor, he arrested the guilty parties only after the third-act, tragic death. The remake changes the old man into a female investigator named Shirley Vogel, played by Kathy Bates.

In this case, Shirley is a butch, crass, and cynical cancer survivor. She has no affection for men, noting that "testosterone" is so powerful it should be "put in bombs." She also derides her former husband because, comically, he made love with his socks on. Like her film predecessor, Shirley also stumbles upon a crime in progress, but because the climactic violence is perpetrated against a male (and a nasty, deserving one at that), Shirley lets it go rather than apprehending the guilty parties. She shrugs her shoulders and belatedly joins the conspiracy: three women "survivors" allied against one monster of a man.

All women must survive some trauma, the film seems to suggest, and in an era in which women were cutting off men's private parts (following marital rape), shooting their lover's wives in the face, being murdered over paranoia regarding infidelity (the O.J. Simpson case), or publicly slandered for having the courage to speak out regarding harassment (Anita Hill), this was a highly-relevant comment on the times.

The nineties *Diabolique* explicitly involves a love triangle, of course, but this time Nicole is the wild card and, in many ways, the film's real protagonist. In the original film, she sided against poor Christina. In the remake, this is no longer the case. Nicole regrets her treatment of the saintly ex-nun Mia and joins her in murdering Guy. Critics absolutely hated this revised ending, feeling that it utilized the conventions of the slasher film in a gimmicky and cheap way. For instance, Guy gets a rake to the head.

While the new *Diabolique* is clearly not in the same league as the original film, this re-interpreted ending actually works in context of the 1990s. Early in the film, Nicole and Mia drown Guy, but it's a trick to manipulate Mia; Nicole and Guy are actually in on a plan together (only Mia doesn't know it.) The swimming pool scuffle that ends the modern remake is staged, in close visual fashion as a deliberate echo of that earlier drowning ... only in the pool this time. Here, finally, Nicole comes through, and actually works with Mia. She actually gets her hands dirty. In the earlier bathtub drowning, Mia noted to Nicole that she didn't seem upset by the execution of a cold-blooded, hands-on murder.

This was so—as we learn later—because there was no real murder occurring. Nicole was playing at being a murderess, and the victim (Guy) wasn't really dead. But it's clear that this time around, Nicole is absolutely shaken, mortified, by the battle. The confident facade of a femme fatale has dropped, and Nicole has embraced, at long last, her sisterhood in abuse and degradation. She's finally turned her venom in the appropriate direction: towards Guy.

It's no coincidence or oversight that this *Diabolique* removes a relevant discussion of Miguel/Guy's poor upbringing that was featured in the 1955 film. Exculpatory evidence is not presented, and this "Guy" is a person to be hated and despised, with no ameliorating humanity. And even his name, "Guy," reminds us of his offending sex. This remake also suggests the cad was having an affair with a third woman (whom he paid to have an abortion), thus justifying Nicole's switching teams at the last moment. The subtext of this film: like many an abusive man, Guy had it coming.

While the color photography of *Diabolique* can't match the suffocating, oppressive mood of the original film, the remake picks up considerable points with costume design. Nicole's garish wardrobe in the film is a brilliant, resonant touch: she's dressed like a white-trash cougar, contextualizing the character as part-and-parcel of the Jerry Springer culture. Stone is terrific as heir to Signoret here, playing a snapping, sarcastic barracuda who apparently lives by the proverb, "the tongue is like a sharp knife; it kills without drawing blood."

When another character reminds the smoking Nicole that second-hand smoke kills, Stone quips, "Yeah, but not reliably," and then stalks off. Ouch.

Notable for portraying all its female "devils" in positive fashion, since even Nicole is admirably loyal, *Diabolique* represents a perfect time capsule of the feminist early 1990s. The film is true to this line of thought and is eminently watchable, but by 1996, some of the horror aspects of the film no longer truly terrified. Audiences had been around the block many times since the 1955 original and seen all the "let's scare my wife to death" films *Les Diaboliques* inspired, meaning that the scene of Guy rising, zombie-like from the bath-tub, no longer carried the visual impact it once did.

The rake in the head, violent but somehow silly, was a more typical nineties touch.

The Fan * * *

Critical Reception

"A guilty pleasure among the many, often forgettable DeNiro roles of this decade. In typical maniacal fashion, Bobby takes on the part of an obsessed fan, stalking slugger Wesley Snipes. Nice to see Ellen Barkin return from oblivion for this one, and DeNiro is always at his best playing wackos."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Wesley Snipes (Bobby Rayburn); Robert De Niro (Gil Renard); Ellen Barkin (Jewel Stern); John Leguizamo (Manny); Benicio Del Toro (Juan Primo); Patti D'Arbanville-Quinn (Ellen

Renard); Chris Mulkey (Tim); Andrew J. Ferchland (Richie Renard); Brandon Hammond (Sean Rayborn); Charles Hallahan (Coop); Dan Butler (Garrity); Kurt Fuller (Bernie); Michael Jace (Scaper); Don S. Davis (Stook); Stoney Jackson (Zamora); John Kruk (Lanz); Edith Diaz (Elvira); Jack Black (Broadcast Technician).

CREW: Tristar Pictures and Mandalay Entertainment present a Wendy Finerman and Scott Free Production of a Tony Scott film. *Castings:* Ellen Lewis. *Music:* Hanz Zimmer. *Costume Designer:* Rita Ryack, Daniel Orlandi. *Film Editors:* Christian Wagner, Claire Simpson. *Production Designer:* Ida Random. *Director of Photography:* Dariusz Wojski. *Executive Producers:* Bill Unger, James Skotchdopole, Barrie M. Osborne. *Based on the book by:* Peter Abrahams. *Screenplay by:* Phoebe Sutton. *Produced by:* Wendy Finerman. *Directed by:* Tony Scott. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 116 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In San Francisco, knife salesman Gil Renard (De Niro) is on the verge of losing his job and even his son, Richie (Ferchland), who has moved in with Renard's estranged wife (Quinn) and boyfriend, Tim (Mulkey). Gil's only source of pleasure is watching professional baseball, and soon he focuses all of his obsessive energies on baseball player Bobby Rayburn (Snipes), new to the San Francisco Giants. When Rayburn falls into a slump, Gil makes a move into his life, a move that ultimately escalates from stalking to kidnapping and murder.

COMMENTARY: Between Robert De Niro's trademark intensity and Tony Scott's jack-hammer directorial style, the 1996 interloper thriller *The Fan* packs a hell of a melodramatic wallop. De Niro makes his obsessed character an absolutely aggressive, compulsive rage-a-holic, and Scott records every confrontation with a pounding, relentless, increasingly uncomfortable intensity.

Take away a man's job, take away a man's family, suggests *The Fan*, but don't dare take away a pastime obsession because you're asking for a world of pain.

As De Niro's Gil Renard inches ever closer to his boiling point, *The Fan* crosses the line from being terrifying in an entertaining way to actually being genuinely upsetting ... and that's a good thing for a horror film. By the point that Renard abandons his son in a crowded

stadium or curses out the boy's little league coach, audiences are absolutely on edge. This is because, perhaps, we all have met a guy like Gil Renard: an inexplicably angry person who wants more than anything to get in your face. It takes just one little slip-up and people like this are coming at you, feeling victimized, raging against you all out of proportion to any supposed infraction.

I will never forget a personal incident involving a woman like Gil. It was 1993, and my wife and I pulled into a Blockbuster Video Store. We didn't see another vehicle near the parking space we took and parked the car. We were not out of the car for more than a second when an angry white woman began to harangue us about stealing her parking place. She followed us into the store, and promptly informed us that her husband was in the pick-up truck outside, waiting with a shotgun. It was stunning. An innocent misunderstanding turned into a death-worthy offense.

In 1997, this all-too-common condition (which is apparently behind the 1990s phenomenon of "road rage") was actually diagnosed in the DSM IV as a mental disorder called impulse control disorder, and it was characterized by "impulsive aggression" and a "disproportionate reaction to any provocation, perceived or real."



Bobby Rayburn (Wesley Snipes, front) signs autographs for fans, unaware that an interloper, Gil (Robert De Niro, right), is closing in. From *The Fan* (1996).

That description fits Gil Renard to a tee in *The Fan*. He is angry that his wife has left him. He is angry that he is a bad salesman. He is angry that his son lives under the roof of another man. But he never looks at himself or his own aggressive, angry behavior as the source of his problems. "People are afraid of you," his boss tells him.

With so much in his life going wrong, Gil pours all of his energies into professional baseball. This is made plain from the movie's opening shots, which feature a long, lingering look at his fan memorabilia, including license plates and bobble head figures. Why does Renard love base-ball so much? It's better than life, he tells his son. "It's fair."

But fair according to whose definition? That's the crux of the issue, as Renard finds that that his new icon, Bobby Rayburn (Wesley Snipes), doesn't equal Gil's own level of "commitment" to the game. As someone in the spotlight, Bobby says to Gil that "the only person you should play for is yourself." He also calls the fans "losers" and claims "not to care" about winning or losing.

Gil's ultimate comeback to that kind of thinking is a campaign of terror to make Bobby care. He abducts Bobby's son and threatens to murder him unless, at his next game, Bobby hits a home run for him. (Furthermore, Gil wants his photo on the Jumbotron and the 50 million viewers to be told that the home run was for him.)

Now do you care, Bobby? Now do you care?

Clearly, Gil is our old friend, the interloper, a character who wheedles his way into someone's life and then jumps barrier after barrier. But, capturing the vibe of the era, there's something else at work in Gil. It's a sense of entitlement. Without being asked, Gil murdered Bobby's chief rival, Primo. Now, he wants credit for ending Bobby's slump. "A simple thank you would be nice," he says. He also declares, "My life has been unfair to me." Well, Bobby never asked for help, did he? And life isn't fair. For anyone.

The Fan thrives by focusing so much on De Niro and his mad outlook on life. We see him in a plethora of extreme close-ups, views which reveal his barely contained anger, his smug superiority, his utter contempt for everyone else. Scott handles the material with a sledge-hammer, and some scenes provoke nausea as much as terror, particularly the scene in which Gil stabs Primo in a sauna, and the player bleeds out in the heat. The screen literally turns red with blood.

The word "fan" is an abbreviation of the word "fanatic," and *The Fan* does look at what happens when a mentally-unbalanced person becomes un-healthily obsessed with a celebrity. Here it's a base-ball player, but it could be a movie star or a singer. It was a timely issue in

the 1990s too. Young actress Rebecca Shaeffer, star of the sitcom *My Sister Sam* was stalked and murdered by an overzealous fan in 1989. And in 1995, not long before the release of *The Fan*, the Tejano sensation Selena was murdered by the president of her fan club.

Yet, *The Fan* isn't strictly about celebrity stalkers, either. It's about the fact that there are some really angry, unbalanced people out there, and—if they are unhappy in their lives—the slightest thing will set them off. God forbid you piss them off, even inadvertently. Because, like Gil Renard, they are going to make you care; they are going to make your life Hell until they feel vindicated.

It's really scary, and *The Fan* gets to that fear in a potent, operatic way. The movie isn't subtle or nuanced. But by the time it gets to its last act, and a child's life is on the line if his Daddy can't hit a home run ... well, it's got you right where it wants you. It hits a double, and is stealing third.

Fear * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Mark Wahlberg (David McCall); Reese Witherspoon (Nicole); William Peterson (Steven Walker); Alyssa Milano (Margo); Amy Brenneman (Laura); Tracy Frain (Logan); Jason Kristofer (Terry); Christopher Gray (Toby); Todd Caldercott (Gary)

CREW: Imagine Entertainment Presents a Brian Grazer Production, a James Foley film. *Casting:* Debra Zane. *Music:* Carter Burwell. *Film Editor:* David Brenner. *Production Designer:* Alex McDowell. *Director of Photography:* Thomas Kloss. *Executive Producer:* Karen Kehela. *Written by:* Christopher Crowe. *Produced by:* Brian Grazer. *Directed by:* James Foley. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A sixteen-year-old girl, Nicole (Witherspoon), rebels against her over-protective father, Steven (Peterson), by dating a handsome, dangerous young man named David (Wahlberg). Nicole gives this interloper the code to the family house alarm system and breaks her curfew. She also loses her virginity to David. Soon,

however, David reveals a violent, temperamental side, and when Nicole breaks up with him, David threatens the safety of the family.

COMMENTARY: Yet another devious interloper invades American apparent domestic bliss in *Fear*, a film from director James Foley which is a little bit *Straw Dogs* (1972), a little bit *Fatal Attraction* (1987), and a little bit *Cape Fear* (1991).

The point of view in this film is distinctly male, reflecting the concern of a headstrong father, played by William Peterson, that his teenage girl (Reese Witherspoon) is old enough to have sexual intercourse. If the resonant image of *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* remains a hot nanny breast-feeding a baby that isn't hers (and thereby up-ending the natural order of things in the process), the image from *Fear* that carries the most sizzle today is that of Daddy discovering a Trojan condom wrapper on the floor of his adolescent daughter's bedroom—proof-positive that the fox has gotten inside the henhouse.

An undeniable undercurrent in *Fear* is the Lear Complex, a father's obsession with his daughter. Here, Peterson plays Steve, an unhappy patriarch consumed with two things: his work and keeping his sixteen-year-old daughter pure. Almost everything that interloper David does is explicitly designed to usurp Daddy's position as the rightful receptacle of Nicole's affections. Before David's arrival, she wears a necklace that reads "Daddy's Girl." After David's invasion, Daddy is left picking up condom wrappers.

The battle as joined is one of conquering "virgin" territories. David cracks the alarm on the family house, allowing him inside Steven's inner sanctum. Later, David also destroys Steve's classic car (after making love to Nicole) and then informs Dad that he has popped "both" his cherries. Thus *Fear* is a pissing contest: a battle between two swinging dicks to determine which is longer.

As is the case in many films of the interloper type, the establishment figure and protagonist, Steven, brings on many of the problems upon himself. Nicole strays only after he has chosen work over daughter, and a "family night" falls through. He is egocentric and doesn't like being replaced in his daughter's world by hunky David, but importantly his dislike of David occurs before anyone knows how much trouble the kid is. In other words, the dislike is *automatic* because David is dating Steven's daughter. David uses this irrational dislike against Steven: he beats himself up, and then blames Steven for his bruises, getting everyone to sympathize with him instead of the

ousted-father figure.

In its best moments, *Fear* also asks what kind of lessons America's girls are taking away from the culture that worships physically-aggressive, alpha males (like fictional men Steven and David) and real-life athletes such as Mike Tyson and O.J. Simpson. For instance, Nicole's best friend Margot informs Nicole that physical abuse is just a sign of affection, an "asshole way of saying he loves you."

Since when has beating become acceptable behavior in a boyfriend?

For a sixteen-year-old to make that world-weary, soul-deadening excuse is truly depressing, but the film's point is made. In fact, it's very interesting how *Fear* introduces David. He sweeps in to rescue Nicole at a rave when the party becomes violent and property is destroyed. David thus enters the picture as a hero, a man who has saved the damsel-in-distress and swept her off her feet. And indeed, this is precisely how Nicole comes to view him. There's a feminist angle at play here: the "rescue" myth of marriage and the acceptance of reality afterwards. Love means never having to say you're sorry ... for hitting someone.



Violent psychopath David (Mark Wahlberg) peers at his prey in *Fear* (1996).

Later in *Fear*, Margot also makes another comment perfectly in tune with the Clinton 1990s: "Everyone says one thing and then does another." In other words, character doesn't matter; a word is no longer a person's bond; and beliefs can be changed with the wind (or with polls). Where's the outrage?

Mark Wahlberg makes an effective and creepy interloper in this *Fear*, carving the legend "Nicole 4 EVA" in his chest and maintaining a shrine to his lover that includes a Chucky doll and stolen underpants. His malevolent nature only becomes plain in stages. He goes from hero and rebel to wild bad influence. At a carnival, for instance, he manually pleasures Nicole in her nethers while they're both riding a roller-coaster. After that, however, things turn sour and his true nature as abuser is revealed.

The finale of *Fear* is a lot tougher, a lot meaner, and much more savage than the genre generally dictates, and the blazing message that emerges from this film is both feminist and conservative. For Dads: spend more time with your family, don't covet your daughters, and try not to lose your temper so much.

For daughters: don't look for a guy to rescue you. And more importantly, hitting is not just kissing with fists ... it portends something much worse.

The Frighteners * * .

Critical Reception

"In between *Dead Alive* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Peter Jackson gave us this quirky, engaging tale of spiritual shenanigans starring Michael J. Fox as a psychic able to communicate with the dead. Some of Jackson's spark is evident here, but this is neither as subversive as his earlier work, nor as breathtaking as his later efforts."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Michael J. Fox (Frank Bannister); Trini Alvarado (Lucy); Peter Dobson (Ray Lynskey); John Astin (The Judge); Jeffrey Combs (Milton); Dee Wallace Stone (Patricia Bradley); Jake Busey (Johnny Charles Bartlett); Chi McBride (Cyrus); Jim Fyfe (Stuart); Troy Evans

(Sheriff Perry); R. Lee Ermey (Hiles); Julianna McCarthy (Old Lady Bradley); Elizabeth Hawthorne (Magda Rees-Jones); Angela Bloomfield (Debra Bannister); Desmond Kelly (Harry Sinclair).

CREW: A Universal Film. Robert Zemeckis Presents a Wignut Films Production. *Casting:* Victoria Burrows. *Co-Producer:* Tim Sanders. *Creatures and Miniature Effects:* Richard Taylor. *Judge-Make-up:* Rick Baker. *Digital Effects Producer:* Charlie McClellan. *Music:* Danny Elfman. *Film Editor:* Jamie Selkirk. *Production Designer:* Grant Major. *Directors of Photography:* Alun Bollinger, John Blick. *Executive Producer:* Robert Zemeckis. *Produced by:* Jamie Selkirk, Peter Jackson. *Written by:* Fran Walsh, Peter Jackson. *Directed by:* Peter Jackson.

SYNOPSIS: Frank Bannister (Fox), a psychic investigator who can see spirits and ghosts, helps an obnoxious dead man, Ray (Dobson), communicate with his beautiful widow, Lucy (Alvarado). Meanwhile in the same town, a dark force—a Grim Reaper of sorts—is killing healthy people and making the crimes look like unusual heart attacks. The body count nears forty, and Bannister learns that the force responsible is the malevolent ghost of a long-dead serial killer, Johnny Charles Bartlett (Busey). Worse, Johnny seems to have an accomplice in the nearby Fairview Sanitarium, one very much alive...

COMMENTARY: Films featuring state-of-the-art special effects often boast a very short shelf life, especially if all they offer is spectacle. Newer technological advances inevitably replace the previous ones, and in the process reveal some older productions as empty-suits: vehicles for innovation but wholly unsatisfactory as interesting narratives or human drama.

As directed by Peter Jackson, *The Frighteners* is a perfect example. The film consistently mistakes a hyper-velocity, high-decibel noise levels, and an onslaught of admittedly-impressive digital effects for atmosphere, chills, and terror.

Every aspect of the film is overwrought and over-revved, save for Michael J. Fox's grounded and subdued performance. The special effects were indeed state of the art when the film was released in 1996, but the film presents absolutely nothing else of human interest. Today, even those once-impressive special effects are sort of old hat and so the film comes off as second-rate Raimi at best.

What's missing here is the same quality absent from much of Jackson's cinematic oeuvre: *a sense of self-discipline*. His dazzling visuals are crafted for the sake or showiness and nothing else. Instead of merely interpreting a story in the best way possible, the director goes here for the flashy ... ultimately to the detriment of the human story.

For instance, in *The Frighteners'* opening shot, Jackson pushes in towards a mansion's second story window. The camera goes through the window, then between blowing curtains. Next, it heads into a bedroom, weaves down through a mouse hole, and emerges in the ceiling of a second-story foyer, where we see a grand, ornate staircase below.

There, a ghost assiduously chases a scared damsel-in-distress, played by Dee Wallace Stone, through the old house and the specter passes behind walls, under carpets, through doors, and on and on. A few seconds in, the ghost's parameters are so well-defined that scares are diminished.

Much of this dramatic opening "push" inside the Fairview Sanitarium house is accomplished with seamless special effects transitions, meaning, essentially, it isn't a sustained study of space, an unbroken long shot like something a Brian De Palma film might stage (see: *Raising Cain* [1992]) ... and which might actually *mean* something in terms of film grammar and the story's content. Nope, it's just a "cool" (but expensive) way to start *The Frighteners* like a rollercoaster ride.



Frank Bannister (Michael J. Fox, center) is bracketed by ghosts Stuart (Jim Fyfe, left) and Cyrus (Chi McBride) in Peter Jackson's *The Frighteners* (1996).



Three views of the villains in *The Frighteners*. On the left, the deranged Dammers (Jeffrey Combs). Upper right, Patricia Bradley (Dee Wallace Stone), consort to serial killer Johnny Bartlett (Jake Busey).

But even roller coaster rides grow tiresome after an hour and fifty minutes.

The Frighteners bludgeons the audience with a hysterical pace, oodles of digital effects, and lots of hysterical screaming substituting for humor. This approach makes the film seem noisy and busy for most of the running time, but even that isn't the greatest offense. More authentically trouble-some is the fact that important details of the story have not been thought out, or at least presented in a digestible, comprehensible manner for audiences.

For instance, the spirit named Hile (R. Lee Erme, as essentially the drill sergeant character from *Full Metal Jacket* [1987]) protects the local graveyard from intruders. As a spirit, he can change his clothes and even conjure glowing, ghostly machine guns. On several occasions, he fires those "spiritual" machine guns.

In one scene, an out-of-body Frank Bannister, the film's lead

character, battles the Grim Reaper in the graveyard, grabs those spiritual machine guns, and starts blasting away at the monster. The digitally-created villain bucks and whinnies expressively at the multiple bullet impacts, rocked backwards and tossed off balance.

So quick: *what was he being shot with?*

Weren't the guns actually just a projection of Hile's psyche, and therefore ineffective as "real" weapons against a dangerous spirit? Do those "ghost guns" fire real projectiles? *Fake projectiles?* Why do these enigmatic bullets hurt other ghosts, who are, let's say, insubstantial? Can the spirit guns hurt mortal people too? Who manufactured them?

Again, the scene certainly appears impressive thanks to the special effects, but think about what's occurring for one minute and the curtain is pulled back. There's no "there" there.

The Frighteners is loaded with such contradictions. The ghostly Ray dies (and goes through the corridor of light, I suppose...) after the spectral Grim Reaper takes off his face in a flurry of speed and motion.

But Stuart, the ghostly friend of Bannister, gets chopped up in car's fan blade and re-assembles just fine.

So, spirit-on-spirit violence in *The Frighteners* results in a second death (and immediate elevator rides up to Heaven?), but real-life-on-spirit violence only results in spiritual disassembly and re-assembly?

I don't believe it's too much to ask that a movie be consistent from scene-to-scene, but that's a real failure of *The Frighteners*; the rules of spiritual existence are never spelled out in a logical, believable manner. They change as per the whim of the script.

And furthermore, how come Bannister is privy to a flashback of the Sanitarium just at the very moment it is convenient and most needed? And if he can see ghosts, why doesn't his wife drop him a note down from Heaven? Or give him a convenient flashback about his car accident? How come Hile can change his clothes, but Chi McBride's Cyrus is stuck in the disco decade garb he died in? (The answer: because it's hip and funny to have an Afro-1970s dude in the mix.)

Why does Bannister put a gun to his head to initiate a temporary OBE when it's clear such a head wound would actually *kill him*, not temporarily knock him out? And has he done this OBE thing himself before? *If so ... when?*

"We're making a ghost story that takes so many twists and turns that you begin to believe anything is possible," Jackson noted in regards to *The Frighteners*. "And everything is scary. Fear, like your

imagination, has no limits."⁶¹

Right here is the core of the problem, perfectly enunciated: when "anything is possible," when there are no rules, films lose their grounding; they lose all sense of reality. Thus the important point of narrative closure (how you defeat the villain) inevitably feels like a cheat. Just take up spiritual machine guns, Bannister!

I believe that when "anything is possible," *nothing* is scary, because we're no longer in a world we can identify with. Good, successful horror movies establish reality first, then establish the rules of the game, and then play by those rules.

Jeffrey Combs is a great actor and a revered horror icon, but his character in *The Frighteners*, the insane Milton Dammers, exists only to prove an obstacle to Bannister that prolongs the action. Why would a man who has infiltrated cults and battled Satanists not come around to Bannister's logical perspective, especially when it is obvious there is real ghostly activity occurring all around him?

Come to think of it, many characters act out of screenwriter pre-programming rather than logic in this film. What are we to make of the *Gazette* editor, Madge Rees-Jones (Hawthorne), who just hates, hates, hates Bannister and therefore dedicates her life and her professional post to destroying him? Again, she's not open to obvious evidence he is not a fraud and a murderer, and just ticks along in cartoonish lock-step, twirling her metaphorical mustache. She might as well be the wicked witch of the west.

Emotionally, *The Frighteners* is a bust too. When the cartoony Judge, Stuart and Cyrus get killed (again), the audience feels nothing at the loss, perhaps because the film has presented us a series of after-lives in which death, essentially, becomes a meaningless thing.

Worse, the film gives the irritating Ray (Dobson in a sitcom role and performance) a great deal of screen-time to no avail, and no closure. Ray is around so often (at restaurants, in the Sanitarium, etc.), we expect he's going to take some sort of journey of redemption ... or at least experience some growth. Perhaps, in a pinch, he will save his widow from death.

But nothing like that happens ... Ray loses his face to the Reaper and we don't see him again. *Ever*. This is convenient, since his widow, Lucy, and Frank take up a romance.

Michael J. Fox grounds the proceedings as much as is humanly possible, embroiled in his own personal mystery about the car accident that cost him his wife and gave him psychic powers (just like Jeff Goldblum in *Hideaway*), but the actor's sincere efforts are for

naught in a film that is all running, all chasing, all screaming, all stabbing, all shooting.



Future *Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson finds a friend on the set of *The Frighteners* (1996).

Jackson pitches everything here at ninety miles an hour and the result is a paradox: an action-packed film that bores totally, every step of the way. Sure *The Frighteners* is technically adroit. Trail-blazing even. Give it that. But so are many bad films produced in Hollywood today and in the 1990s. They just distract instead of entertaining or illuminating.

In that sense, perhaps, *The Frighteners* remains state-of-the-art.

***From Dusk Till Dawn* * * * ***

" *From Dusk Till Dawn* starts promisingly as a portrait of a dysfunctional relationship between two brothers on a crime spree then dissolves into idiocy when the brothers and their captives encounter a Mexican bar infested with vampires. The first-half of the movie has undeniably craft and humanity but the second half of *From Dusk Till Dawn* represents the nadir of Generation X's adoration of cool violence."—Peter Hanson, *The Cinema of Generation X: A Critical Study of Films and Directors*, McFarland, 2002, page 128

"The script is uneven, but the performances, music score, special effects and action sequences make this a lot of fun."—Stephen Jones, *The Essential Movie Monster Guide: A Century of Creature Features in Film*, Titan Books, 1999, page 155

"Rodriguez and Tarantino prove with this film that they know their movies all right, but to what point? *From Dusk Till Dawn* feels like a movie made by smart film graduate students with nothing much to say but with a terrible, tormenting itch to make movies. They're the cinematic Undead cannibalizing genres and old movies to feed their addiction. Both men are talented filmmakers. Let's hope this film is just a genuflection to the unholy commercial powers of Hollywood."— Andy Pawelczak, *Films in Review*, March/April, 1996, page 59

"... the most repulsive movie experience I've had since *Natural Born Killers*. If I thought Tarantino's head really did explode during the making of the movie, I'd have enjoyed myself. But I assume that was a special effect."—Lawrence Toppmann, *The Charlotte Observer*, " *Dusk Till Dawn* Is Violent, Mindless—Any Plot Is Buried in Blood, Body Parts," January 19, 1996

"Here's a fun film with something in it for everyone. Cheech Marin, Tom Savini, cool weapons, Quentin Tarantino being weird, the most subdued performance ever by Harvey Keitel, George Clooney giving us the cool we've come to expect from him, and the biggest genre switch in any movie since Janet Leigh went from embezzler to embalmer with the flick of a shower curtain. Lots of good music, a lot of humor, and plenty of style. They'll be talking about this one forever."— William Latham,

author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"Really two films in one, this Robert Rodriguez potboiler goes from a Tarantino-esque crime flick to a hardcore vampire gore fest, almost without warning. Excellent turns from George Clooney, Harvey Keitel, Juliette Lewis and Quentin himself make this more than your run-of-the-mill splatter flick. The violence is graphic and inventive, and the wit is razor sharp. Rodriguez and Tarantino's script also captures some of the verve of '70s exploitation horror—years before the rise of Rob Zombie"—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: George Clooney (Seth Gecko); Harvey Keitel (Jacob Fuller); Juliette Lewis (Kate Fuller); Quentin Tarantino (Ritchie Gecko); Ernest Liu (Scott Fuller); Selma Hayek (Satanico Pandemonium); Brenda Hillhouse (Gloria); Marc Lawrence (Old Timer); Cheech Marin (Border Guard/Carlos/Chet Pussy); Michael Parks (Earl McGraw); Kelly Preston (Kelly); Tom Savini (Sex Machine); John Saxon (Stanley Chase); Danny Trejo (Razor Charlie); Fred Williamson (Frost); John Hawkes (Pete Bottoms).

CREW: Dimension Films Presents a Band Apart Production in association with Los Hooligans Productions, a Robert Rodriguez Film. *Casting:* Johanna Ray, Elaine J. Huzzar. *Music:* Graeme Revell. *Costume Designer:* Graciela Mazon. *Production Designer:* Cecilia Montiel. *Special Make-up Effects:* KNB EFX Group. *Executive Producers:* Lawrence Bender, Robert Rodriguez, Quentin Tarantino. *Story by:* Robert Kurtzman. *Written by:* Quentin Tarantino. *Produced by:* Gianni Nunnair, Meir Teper. *Edited and directed by:* Robert Rodriguez. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 108 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Hardened criminals and brothers Seth (Clooney) and Ritchie (Tarantino) Gecko attempt to flee the authorities by heading to Mexico for a rendezvous with their colleagues. These unwanted passengers hitch a ride with the Fuller family, including fallen preacher Jacob (Keitel), his daughter Kate (Lewis) and son Scott (Liu). Seth forces them to cross the border and spend the night at a raunchy strip club and bar called The Titty Twister while awaiting their rendezvous. The night does not go as planned, however, because the

bar is a haven for hundreds of very hungry vampires.



Ritchie Gecko (Quentin Tarantino, left) and Seth Gecko (George Clooney) find themselves in a bar filled with vampires, including Satanico Pandemonium (Selma Hayek, background) in *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996).

COMMENTARY: Quentin Tarantino was the "It" boy of American independent film in the 1990s, writing such efforts as *True Romance* (1993) and *Natural Born Killers* (1994), and directing *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), the award-winning *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Jackie Brown* (1997). The wunderkind and former video clerk also wrote and starred in *From Dusk Till Dawn*, one of the decades great horror films, and a hyper-kinetic genre-blender.

As one might expect from Tarantino, a Lucio Fulci and John Carpenter fan with an encyclopedic knowledge of film history, *From Dusk Till Dawn* is like no other film you've ever seen. It starts out as a crime drama, with the two murderous, thieving Gecko brothers trying to make for Mexico, and then spends its last half in a bar called the Titty Twister and involves a pitched battle against hordes of slavering

vampires. At least a few critics have looked at the film and suggested it blends a third genre, particularly in the spirit of John Carpenter, and features components of the classical Western:

The preacher with the family is the classic representative of civilization, traveling in the desert wilderness and across "the frontier" into Mexico in a mobile home, a modern version of the covered wagon. The brothers, Seth and Richie Gecko, are outlaws. Ritchie (Tarantino) is the one who has gone too far beyond the pale, his unacceptably savage qualities indicated by the unmotivated sexual attacks and murder of the innocent bank teller."⁶²

This comparison of *From Dusk Till Dawn* to a genre Western helps one process the often-incendiary film successfully, because, especially during its early scenes, it plays as deeply immoral. The first scene in the film involves the robbery by the Gecko brothers of a small, desert liquor store, and the murder of a police sheriff in the course of his duty, as well as the murder of a clerk who is cooperating with him. Very soon after this sequence, the audience learns that the Geckos have a hostage in the trunk of their car, an innocent bank teller (mentioned above). The treatment of this woman is especially objectionable. She is threatened, mistreated and ultimately raped and killed by Ritchie Gecko.

This is immoral behavior, to be sure, but the movie doesn't endorse it, or at least not all of it. It doesn't entirely repudiate it either since Tarantino's Ritchie is both insane and, ultimately, depicted as cool, but instead merely depicts the violence outside of typical parameters of good and evil. It is voyeuristic but not joyful about it. The matter-of-fact approach by Tarantino and Rodriguez offers evidence of why many social critics repudiated the 1990s America as the time of "the cynical society." It was because, at least in part, Hollywood movies were no longer populated exclusively by traditional heroes, per se.

Men of violence like the Geckos were becoming more and more the norm. This fact is encoded in the very surname of the protagonists. "Gecko" was also the name of "greed is good" anti-hero, Gordon Gekko, who came to be a pop-culture icon after Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987).

Tarantino had worked with Stone previously on *Natural Born Killers* and the name Gecko is a movie allusion, but also very much a character allusion. The Geckos of both movies sought personal wealth

above all, placing other human concerns at a much lower rank of importance. Not incidentally, geckos are also lizards. So there's the sense again, in the very names of his characters, that Tarantino is specifically telling audiences that these guys are not "good." Ritchie is worse, a sadistic, psychotic foot-fetishist, but Seth is still a law-breaker, a thief and murderer of the police.

The point of the film, however, seems to be that the Geckos are small time, virtual choir boys in comparison to a real evil: the evil of the vampires at the Titty Twister Bar in Mexico. In a battle with monsters, the preacher (played by Harvey Keitel) and his family can use at least one of these guys. Why? Blood-sucking monsters make armed-robbery seem unimportant.

And as slimy as he is, Seth Gecko boasts a code of ethics, a code of behavior that forbids, among other things, his sexual intercourse with an underage girl (he's a bastard but not a "fucking" bastard, he says).

But the vampires do not honor a similar code. They lure men to their doom and then feed, relentlessly. Seth lives firmly by his code, and is highly upset when Ritchie goes against it, acting, essentially, like the evil vampires they later encounter. Ritchie looks at their hostages, similarly, as prey (though mostly sexual prey). However, the end result is the same: the death of innocence.

From *Dusk Till Dawn* takes two criminals and a lapsed preacher and makes them confront the worst Hell imaginable, a place of not just sin and violence, but true depravity. Rodriguez makes this truth plain in his visual introduction to the Titty Twister bar. There's a wild pan up and down the interior of the sleazy joint, revealing its unsavory denizens and, at least subtextually, sizing them up as combatants. When the war comes, there are no atheists in foxholes, if you know what I mean, and the battle is joined. The fallen and the faithless re-discover their humanity in the crucible of battle with the undead.

This is the reason why, *finally*, *FromDusk Till Dawn* works, and works so powerfully. It is the reason why the "bad motherfuckers" crime-portion of the film is not just a graft from another genre atop the horror genre. Instead, Rodriguez and Tarantino indicate that in the absence of a galvanizing evil, man will almost instinctively gravitate toward sin and violence, towards ever-narrowing circles of self-indulgence and vanity. In other words, he will not understand what is meaningful. Seth has set up around himself a perfect order of rules and edicts that enable him to do exactly what he wants to do and get exactly what he wants to get: a variation indeed of the mantra "greed

is good." He wants money. Similarly, Jacob Fuller (Keitel) has been able to turn away from his true path as a servant of God because of his grief over his wife's death.

The vampire encounter in the Titty Twister changes both of these men. It re-connects them to their purpose, towards their common humanity. Ritchie is not able to make that transition. He is already a monster underneath, and the Titty Twister turns him into an outer monster too, a vampire.



Seth (Clooney, right) patches up brother Ritchie's (Tarantino) hand in *From Dusk Till Dawn*.

A deep analysis of *From Dusk Till Dawn*, however, does not necessarily do the film justice. For it is also in the surfaces, in the violence and mayhem, that the film achieves so much of its energy. The last half of the film is a pitched battle between man and creature, with everything on hand in the bar utilized as a weapon. Although the tone at times is exaggerated and comical and the vampires are not differentiated much in terms of personhood (rather they are "godless pieces of shit"), the battle still plays like a crusade of the spirit.

Rodriguez orchestrates the action brilliantly, but he also knows

how to stop the movie's action on a dime when he needs to focus on one important element. For instance, Selma Hayek's striptease with a snake centers the movie and holds audiences rapt for several moments. You don't even realize until the end of the dance that you have been holding your breath. It's not just her physicality that's the cause, it's not just the music, and it's not just the snake ... it's something between the lines. Her allure is the allure of sex but also the allure of evil, and in this movie it is entirely appropriate that a siren like Satanico Pan-demonium should capture the eye of the fallen Geckos, in particular.

From *Dusk Till Dawn* also boasts one of the greatest and most audacious ending shots in modern horror cinema. A long, slow pull-back from the bar reveals that the "club" aspect of the establishment is merely a front, a gimmick. Behind it is a huge, Aztec temple carved out of the desert itself ... a place of blood rites and human sacrifices. And beneath this impressive edifice is a graveyard of modern industrial detritus: the trucks and cars of all those sinners who, tempted by Cheech Marin's seemingly endless description of "pussy," have dared to go inside.

The vampires understand the nature of human sin. They know that the Geckos and their ilk will keep coming—keep feeding their bloody appetites—as long as there is crime and violence in the world, and thugs need a sanctuary. What Jacob and Seth ultimately learn in *From Dusk Till Dawn* is that they don't belong there with the other human refuse. When the real evil falls, they know which side they are on.

Stylish, fast-paced and occasionally silly, *From Dusk Till Dawn* is not just a roller coaster ride and not just a story of human sin. It is about the things that, once encountered, slap us out of our day-to-day concerns and vanities.

***The Ghost and the Darkness* * * .**

Critical Reception

"While *The Ghost and the Darkness* is fine filmmaking, it is also white supremacy at its most insidious."— *The New York Amsterdam News*, Volume 87, Issue #43, October 26, 1996, page 28

Cast and Crew

CAST: Val Kilmer (John Patterson); Michael Douglas (Remington); Tom Wilkerson (Robert Beaumont); John Kani (Samuel); Bernard Hill (Dr. Hawthorne); Emily Mortimer (Helena Patterson); Om Puri (Abdullah); Henry Cele (Makina); Alex Ferns (Nigel Bransford); Kurt Egelhfi (Indian Victim).

CREW: Constellation Films Presents a Douglas/Reuther Production of a Stephen Hopkins film. *Casting:* Mary Selway and Sarah Trevis. *Costume Designer:* Ellen Mirojnick. *Music:* Jerry Goldsmith *Co-Producer:* Grant Hill. *Production Designer:* Stuart Wurtzel. *Director of Photography:* Vilmos Zsigmond. *Film Editors:* Robert Brown, Steve Mirkovich. *Executive Producers:* Michael Douglas, Steven Reuther. *Written by:* William Goldman. *Produced by:* Gale Anne Hurd, Paul Radin, A. Kitman Ho. *Directed by:* Stephen Hopkins. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 109 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 1898, Irish engineer John Patterson (Kilmer) travels to Africa and the "worst place in the world," Tsavo, to build a bridge for an English company. During the long period of construction, however, two unusual lions begin to attack the workers by night. Patterson hunts the lions and sets traps for them, but they only become more determined to feast on human flesh. After all work on the bridge is stopped and the workers threaten revolt, Patterson is joined by a famous hunter, Remington (Douglas), in the hopes that he can stop the two lions—nicknamed "the Ghost" and "the Darkness" from claiming further victims.

COMMENTARY: *The Ghost and the Darkness* wages a valiant battle to do for lions what *Jaws* (1975) did for sharks. Ultimately, the movie can't achieve that lofty goal, in part because lions aren't as inherently terrifying as great white man-eaters and in part because, by movie's end, the filmmakers have resorted to cheap cliché after cliché to drag out the movie's terror, their quiver otherwise empty.

From the first frames, *The Ghost and the Darkness* attempts to pump up the audience's fear surrounding the monstrous, titular lions. As the story commences, the audience is informed via voiceover that the events depicted in the film are true, and that factoid does help to

generate chills. This strategy always works, for some reason, in horror: that opening crawl, card or voice-over establishing that a terrifying tale is based on facts. Perhaps it works because, at least in America of the 1990s, we were all mostly immune from fear and the unexpected in our daily lives. Openings like *The Ghost and the Darkness* remind us that there is more in heaven and earth than is dreamed of in daytime television's philosophy, I guess.

The filmmakers also quickly make their lions seem supernaturally clever, and that's a good idea; to give the animals a sense of more than the wild, something malevolent. Accordingly, in short order, the predators take out the metaphorical body (the camp foreman) and the spirit (the camp preacher) of Patterson's bridge crew, leaving the survivors in a panic. The sub-textual idea that the animals could be natural gods, punishing the white man for trying to "own the world," actually works pretty well too, especially in terms of the imperialistic attitudes on display. There is a cost, the movie says, for technology's sweep into the natural, untamed places.

Once Remington, the Great White Hunter, enters the picture, director Hopkins also escorts the audience literally into the lion's den: into a dark, hillside cave where the animals have dragged their prey to eat it. It's an appropriately foreboding place, with a mountain of cast-off human bones in evidence. The cave promises a fate worse than death, and that's scary too.

The Ghost and the Darkness even cleverly attempts to draw a kind of landscape/seascape parallel with Spielberg's *Jaws*. One early scene includes a grass-level perspective from outside the camp. The camera is pitched at lion's eye level, looking towards the film's hero, Patterson (Kilmer), and others. The tall wind-blown grass reeds are like the water, and the lion huddles off-screen, just below the surface—able to attack, unnoticed, in a moment's notice. In other words, this field with obstructing grass is the equivalent of an ocean, where the land sharks prowl.

The film also showcases a pretty good sense of place. The screenplay goes to great length to establish Tsavo as "the worst place in the world," or "the place of slaughter" and then puts the most upbeat, resourceful, humanist hero, Patterson, imaginable against it, and keeps dealing him reverses. It's the failure of technology and reason to stop the supernatural, and again, it works pretty darn well.

But then Michael Douglas enters the movie as Remington, a larger-than-life hunter, and the movie becomes a cheesy male-bonding epic. I suppose one could argue that *Jaws* also had a male bonding aspect in its last act, but it was anything but cheesy. If anything, it

was nicely understated. Here, Douglas (also the film's producer) gives himself the cheesiest lines imaginable and presents himself in larger-than-life fashion. It's impossible not to regard his appearance at the 45-minute point as an announcement, "here I am, the big star, to save this movie."

Remington is a walking cliché factor and puts too fine a point on the situation. "Now can you control your fear?" he asks, underlining the issue. Then, in achingly cheesy fashion, he tells Patterson, "when you meet your son, you hold him high!" Ugh. It's a total shift of tone and intent from the movie's first, serious-minded act and all the carefully-sustained, carefully-built horror bleeds away.

Apparently desperate by movie's last act, *Ghost and the Darkness* then features a ludicrous dream sequence in which Patterson's wife and new baby show up in Tsavo, and promptly get eaten by a lion. For a film of such carefully sustained reality to rely on the convention of the nightmare and ensuing stay awake show is tantamount to an admission that the movie can't generate its scares within legitimate narrative boundaries. It must resort to tricks. And a "nightmare" scene in a historical horror movie like this sticks out like a sore thumb.

Was Patterson's dream based on a true story too?

Throughout the first act of *Ghost and the Darkness*, "Terror had now built a home inside of us," but then, with cheesy characters and rubber-reality tricks, terror moved out.

I've written about this before in *Horror Films of the 1970s*, but even large wild cats like the lions featured here don't necessarily make effective villains. Seen in their totality, they tend to be sleek, beautiful and dignified ... not black-eyed, razor-toothed denizens of another realm, like sharks. They don't provoke fear at the very sight of them. So *Ghost and the Darkness* really has to work overtime to make the lions scary, featuring extreme close-ups of lion eyes, and roaring, wide-open lion maws. Sometimes, the film shows the animals in silhouette. By the final scene, however, the lions are out in the open and they don't seem supernatural, they don't seem like angry gods ... they just seem like lions, and the movie stops working as a tale of fear.

Over the years, many when-animals-attack movies have sought to steal the crown from *Jaws* and virtually none have succeeded (though I am very fond of some of them). *The Ghost and the Darkness* has big stars, great locations, impressive visual effects and a true story behind it, and it still isn't a pimple on *Jaws'* ass. There's absolutely nothing here that can compare to the horror of Quint's U.S. Indianapolis story in *Jaws*, or the pure, terrifying jolt of the Spielberg film prologue, in which a nude, beautiful swimmer is ripped apart in the dark surf by

the interloper from below.

The Ghost and the Darkness may be true, but it isn't truly terrifying.

***Haunted* * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Aidan Quinn (David Ash); Kate Beckinsale (Christina Mariell); Anthony Andrews (Robert Mariell); John Gielgud (Dr. Henry Doyle); Anna Massey (Nanny Tess Webb); Alex Lowe (Simon Mariell); Geraldine Somerville (Kate); Victoria Shalet (Juliet); Linda Bassett (Madam Bruntski); Hilary Mason (Elderly Lady); Emily Hamilton (Mary); Edmund Moriarity (Liam).

CREW: Lumière Pictures Presents a Double "A" Picture and American Zoetrope production of a Lewis Gilbert film. *Casting:* Joyce Nettles. *Production Designers:* John Fenner, Brian Ackland-Snow. *Film Editor:* John Jympson. *Music:* Debbie Wiseman. *Director of Photography:* Tony Pierce-Roberts. *Executive Producers:* Francis Ford Coppola, Fred Fuchs, Ralph Kamp. *Based on the novel by:* James Herbert. *Written by:* Tim Prager, Bob Kellett, Lewis Gilbert. *Produced by:* Lewis Gilbert, Anthony Andrews. *Directed by:* Lewis Gilbert. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 107 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Sussex, 1905, young David Ash (Quinn) is accidentally involved in the death of his twin sister. In 1928, David returns to England as a famous author and psychology professor who investigates the paranormal. He is asked to visit a woman in Sussex who claims to be vexed by evil spirits. At Edbrook, he falls for the woman's young niece, Christina (Beckinsale). As David delves deeper into the mystery of the old home, he finds that Christina and her strange, arrogant brothers share a terrifying secret—and that the past is not truly dead.

COMMENTARY: It's always tempting for film critics to fall for the so-

called *Masterpiece Theater* ruse. In other words, for critics to fall all over themselves praising something made in England, with renowned British actors starring in it, that's a "sumptuous" period piece. These above-the-board qualities give a film instant prestige in some pretentious-leaning circles, but they don't always make a great film.

Case in point: *Haunted*.

This is a horror film featuring lovely production values, top-notch British actors like John Gielgud in major roles, and which makes beautiful and vivid the early days of the 20th century. But once you've ticked off all those features, it's plain that this ghost story makes no sense. It hasn't been thought out.

Haunted actually starts out strong, and with an interesting character in the lead. David Ash (Quinn) is a man who has known tragedy in his life—the death of his sister as a child—and who has, because of it, turned to a life of debunking paranormal activities. The film sets up an interesting debate: how is one to be rendered immortal? By the existence of a "ghost," indicating the sentient life goes on, or through works of art?

A painting, as the film notes, captures the soul of a painter and his subject, making both immortal. That, perhaps, is David's definition at the start of the movie. He meets a woman, Christina (Beckinsale), who feels differently. If you take away the magic of ghosts or the paranormal, as the dialogue suggests, you take away the capacity to love.

Much of *Haunted* involves this debate. Is a study of the supernatural a waste of time, or the search for the magic in our existence? What is true immortality? Why is immortality important to human beings?

When the movie ponders such questions, it's interesting. But then, at movie's end, the truth is revealed to David. He has spent several days in the company of ghosts, at a house that changed its form (from burned out husk to vivid, gorgeous mansion), and the ghost of his sister saves him from the evil of the ghosts.

Okay. Let me take a deep breath here.

Through the course of the film, David lives at a house that is actually a burned out, empty shell, but which appears to be fully restored and beautiful. In fact, he actually telephones his office and his secretary from the house. Which, if we are to believe the movie's ending, would have no operable telephone in it, right?

So the first thing we have to believe is that the house is such a powerful supernatural force that it can reshape itself, create fresh

linens on the beds for its guests, and even place long-distance phone calls without benefit of a "real" telephone.

But then the movie reveals that Christina and her brothers are also ghosts. David has had sex with Christina so again ... wow. This is pretty dramatic. The movie suggests that we can have sex with ghosts and that it will feel absolutely "normal." But hey, if the supernatural can place long-distance phone calls, why not also get a little nookie, you know?



David Ash (Aidan Quinn) is confronted by a woman who believes in ghosts (Anna Massey) in *Haunted* (1996).

Adding insult to injury, David learns that the doctor whom he has been conversing with all week, played by John Gielgud, is also a ghost. So basically, David spent days and days in the presence of ghosts in multiple locations, including a burned out house. But he couldn't tell.

Imagination in horror is one thing, but the conclusion of *Haunted* is utterly ridiculous and counter to the film's central conceits (about immortality resting in art, or in memory). David not only discovers proof of the supernatural, he sleeps on supernatural beds, has sex with supernatural women, visits a ghostly doctor, places telephone calls on non-existent telephones, and is rescued by the ghost of his long-dead sister.

If it were that easy to prove the existence of the supernatural, debunkers would have gone out of business a long time ago. And for all the surface value of *Haunted*, for all the lovely countryside locations, for all the talented, British-accented actors, this is one of the dumbest and most intellectually-dishonest movies I've ever seen.

Hellraiser IV: Bloodlines **(a.k.a. *Hellraiser: Bloodline*) * ***

Critical Reception

"I was far more interested in the material about the origins of the box and the early Cenobites than I was about the 'Pinhead in Space' portion of the movie. I admire the good intentions of trying to do something interesting with the series again after the abysmal *Hell on Earth*, but this still wasn't enough to make the franchise interesting again."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bruce Ramsay (Phillip/John/Paul Merchant); Valentina Vargas (Angelique); Kim Myers (Bobbi); Christine Harnos (Rimmer); Charlotte Chatton (Genevieve); Paul Perri (Edwards); Doug Bradley (Pinhead); Adam Scott (Jacques); Court-land Mead (Jack); Mickey Cottrell (Duc Luc L'Isle); Louis Toreme (Auguste); Pat Skipper (Carducci); Wren Brown (Parker).

CREW: Dimension Films and Trans Atlantic Entertainment, in Association with Clive Barker, present *Hellraiser IV: Bloodlines*. Casting: Andrea Stone, Laurel Smith. *Make-up Effects Created and Designed by:* Gary Tunnicliffe. *Production Designer:* Ivo Christante. *Costume Designer:* Eileen Kennedy. *Film Editor:* Rod Dean, Randolph K. Bricker, Jim Prior. *Music:* Daniel Licht. *Director of Photography:* Gerry Lively. *Executive Producer:* Clive Barker, Paul Rich, G. Casey Bennett. *Written by:* Peter Atkins. *Produced by:* Nancy Rae Stone. *Directed by:* Alan Smithee. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 86 minutes.

INCANTATION: "Do I look like someone who cares what God

thinks?"—Pinhead (Doug Bradley), in *Hellraiser IV: Bloodlines*

SYNOPSIS: In the year 2127 A.D., a team of soldiers arrive at Minos, the Company's most profitable space station, and apprehend the genius who built and then stole it, Dr. Merchant (Ramsay). During an interrogation by Officer Rimmer (Harnos), Merchant reveals that the station itself is a trap for an immortal demon, and then goes on to recount the long history of his accursed family. In the 1800s, his ancestor, Phillip, was the greatest toymaker in France and was enlisted by a magician, D'Isle (Cottrell), to create a puzzle box—the Lament Configuration. D'Isle utilized the box to open the doorway of Hell and summon a demon called Angelique (Vargas), and over the years, she has tempted the toymaker's family with the purpose of creating a larger box ... one that could permit the Legions of Hell to pass into our world unhindered. Angelique's mission eventually became Pinhead's (Bradley) and now, in deep space, Merchant plans to destroy the doorway to Hell once and for all.

COMMENTARY: As early as the 1980s, a joke circulated in horror fandom that the only sure-fire way to get rid of the seemingly-immortal boogeyman, Michael Myers, was to blast him into space on a rocket and leave him in orbit. This joke was actually referenced in 1995's *Curse of Michael Myers* (during a radio-call in show) and later became the plot-line of the outer space *Friday the 13th* entry, *Jason X* (2000).

But it was the *Hellraiser* franchise that reached outer space first in the underwhelming, ineptly-staged *Bloodlines* (1996). One small step for the franchise, one giant misstep for horror films of the 1990s.

The last of the *Hellraiser* films to be granted a theatrical release, *Bloodlines* should have and could have been a genuine epic. The film dramatizes an impressive generational storyline that takes Clive Barker's brilliant and disturbing concepts of horror from the 1800s to the 2120s, revealing the origin of the Lament Configuration, that much-sought-after puzzle box that has caused Kirsty and others so many problems in earlier entries.

Of even more interest, *Bloodlines* posits a sort of French Revolution or turnover in Hell itself. The evil and sultry Angelique (Vargas) apparently once held Pinhead's job, and—with a posse of

demon clowns (no longer in the film)—tempted men to their doom. But then, at some point, Hell got serious, order was overturned and the grim-faced Pinhead and his cenobite scientists ascended.

In one short scene, Angelique and Pinhead meet on Earth and discuss how things have changed in the Realm Below, reflecting different philosophies about how best to defeat and entrap mankind. Angelique favors the art of seduction while Pinhead has a preference for the bludgeon of suffering. This is actually a pretty great scene—two demons talking shop—and there's never been anything like it in the *Hellraiser* movies.

Another fantastic image in *Bloodlines* finds Pinhead gazing down upon a view-screen image of Earth, surrounded by space. He calls the planet "the Garden of Eden," the "Garden of Flesh," and reflects how mankind sees the light (represented by the sun), but is in fact surrounded by a sea of blackness (space). That's a good, scary observation and one that audiences believe the philosophical Pinhead might make. It also contextualizes our existence in a chilling way.

Yet for all the epic scope and interesting passing-of-the-guard from one demon regime to another, *Bloodlines* is strangely inert and unfocused. The powers that be at Dimension apparently wanted the story to get to Pinhead more quickly, and ordered cuts and changes. Rather than vet these changes, original director Kevin Yagher had his name removed and was listed as "Alan Smithee." *Halloween VI's* Joe Chappelle apparently oversaw the re-shoots, also without screen credit. The result is a film that makes little narrative sense, fails to deliver scares, and features several seeming violations of the *Hellraiser* canon.

In terms of narrative coherence, *Bloodlines* fails to connect the dots. In the second movement of the story, the one featuring John Merchant and the Lament Configuration skyscraper constructed at the end of *Hell on Earth*, there is the suggestion of an illicit romance between Angelique and the architect. He dreams of making love to her, but then Pinhead acts as if John and Angelique really have been together. The dialogue doesn't match the action. Has John actually cheated on his wife, Bobbi (Kim Myers of *Freddy's Revenge* [1985]), or has he only dreamed of it? The audience isn't certain.



Angelique (Valentina Vargas) suits up as a Cenobite in *Hellraiser IV: Bloodlines* (1996).

Because of cuts and re-shoots, the story doesn't exactly flow naturally. Characters change positions from shot-to-shot due to excised material, and scenes just begin with no build-up or generation of atmosphere. For instance, in the film's climax, a scene just begins with Pinhead standing in a room of chains (on the space station). Across from him is Merchant (really a hologram using the Quaid trick from *Total Recall* [1990]), and they carry on a conversation. How did either character get there? Did they just run into each other? Again, the audience isn't certain.

Because the film boasts no sense of atmosphere (except when Christopher Young's brilliant, award-winning score is resurrected) it isn't scary. And the special effects don't help either. For some reason, Pinhead has brought along his pet dog this time around, and the chattering animal is so cheap and stupid-looking that it is seen only in quick cuts, or as a shadow creeping by.

Any *Hellraiser* story that could lay claim to telling the full story of the Lament Configuration might survive weak execution or a few gaps in narrative sense, but *Bloodlines* fails most egregiously because it violates the rules set up by the previous films. For instance, it has been established in previous *Hellraiser* films that "hands don't call" the Cenobites, "desire does." Well, in *Bloodlines*, Angelique gets an innocent bystander she picked up at a party to open the box ... and it works. He's dragged to Hell when clearly he's a virtual innocent in

these affairs. He wanted an easy lay, not eternal damnation.

Is that the level of desire the Cenobites go for? In *Hell-bound*, Pinhead passed Tiffany by after she opened the puzzle, realizing that she was just a pawn in Channard's game. Perhaps, in *Bloodlines*, he was feeling less charitable?

Worse than this lapse in intent, Pinhead is actually depicted in the film going out into the world to kidnap John's wife and child to use as "live bait." First, how does Pinhead get from the skyscraper to John's apartment building without raising a few eyebrows?

He can't just open and close the portal to Hell, because that's the reason he wants John in the first place: to remove some of the limits on the Configuration's portal powers. Secondly, Bobbi and Jack (wife and child of John) have done absolutely nothing to "call" Pinhead.

On the contrary, they are innocents who have never even seen the box and therefore should not be vulnerable to the demon.

On top of this, *Bloodlines* makes the same mistake as *Hell on Earth*, having Pinhead turn seemingly-random people into Cenobites just for the hell of it, if you'll pardon the expression. Originally, the Cenobites were pioneers, explorers in the realm of pain. They were transformed humans ... but humans of a certain ... evil. The evil Channard, for instance, desired to become a Cenobite and pursued a life of evil to do it.

In this film, two dopey twin security guards—who don't appear to have a perverse thought between them—are transformed into Cenobites by Pinhead. Why? They haven't opened the box either. They have just stumbled on Pinhead, and he "gifts" them with the much-sought after (by some) transformation. Furthermore, how does Pinhead get the Cenobite-making machinery (depicted in *Hellbound*) to Earth to foster this transformation?

Also, it seems that Angelique and Pinhead have a different mission this time out than in the past. Previously, these explorers came to take souls. But in *Bloodlines*, they have an imperialistic bent: wishing to open more doors and turn the whole of Earth into the yawning gateway to Hell. Since *Bloodline* occurs in the 1800s, in 1996, and in 2127 A.D., respectively, it seems that some mention of this "plan" would have been appropriate in the previous Hellraiser films, especially since we know Pinhead was "active" in 1987, 1989 and 1992 respectively.

And heck, last time we saw Pinhead he had shunned Hell for his own campaign in *Hell on Earth*, but now he's back taking orders.

Finally, *Bloodlines* goes to some lengths to depict the origin of

Angelique, Pinhead's predecessor in Hell. She is an important character with her own distinctive way of operating. And yet the film never gives her a final sequence, an "end" to her story. Merchant sets a trap for Pinhead and destroys the space station. We see Pinhead consigned to oblivion (with a gasp of the word "amen,") but there's not even a token shot of Angelique dying or exploding, or escaping. The film just forgets she's there entirely.

Bloodlines is a film with so much latent potential and it's a shame the execution is so terribly botched. On the one hand, the combination of the technology and magic is a great idea, but on the other hand, the space station and futuristic environs of the film look flimsy, like a Roger Corman film circa 1981.

On the one hand, the film understands that the long history of the Lament Configuration is a great idea, but on the other, it lingers on devil dogs, a stupid Siamese twin Cenobite and individual stories that play more like sketches than scenes in a movie.

Finally, *Bloodlines* is a movie that sadly echoes one of Pinhead's best lines in the film. "I am exquisitely empty."

Amen, Pinhead.

The Island of Dr. Moreau * * *

Critical Reception

"Nobody is going to get too excited by this film's cheesy, *Planet of the Apes*— style prosthetic monsters, but that is not to say that there are no thrills in store. Come see Marlon Brando, flabby and in fantastical get-ups, imitating Robert Morley! Come see Val Kilmer imitating Marlon Brando imitating Robert Morley! Well, it may not be a thrill, but it is certainly a laugh."—James Bowman, *American Spectator*, October, 1996, page ⁶³

"Easily one of the most infamous films of modern times. Although it is dreadful, how can you not love Marlon Brando and Val Kilmer competing over who is the bigger ham (Brando wins, hands down), or the good doctor's bizarre assistant, the alleged inspiration for Dr. Evil's Mini-Me? Look up 'so bad it's good' in the dictionary, and you are likely to find this movie's title listed."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

CAST: Marlon Brando (Moreau); Val Kilmer (Montgomery); David Thewlis (Edward Douglas); Fairuza Balk (Aissa); Ron Perlman (Sayer of the Law); Marco Hofschneider (M'Ling); Temeura Morrison (Azazello); William Hootkin (Kiril); Daniel Rigney (Hyena Swine); Mark Dacascus (Lo-May); Miguel Lopez (Waggdi); David Hudson (Bison Man).

CREW: New Line Cinema Presents an Edward R. Pressman Production of a John Frankenheimer Film. *Casting:* Valerie McCaffrey. *Music:* Gary Chang. *Special Creature and Make-up Effects:* Stan Winston. *Executive Producers:* Tim Zinnemann, Claire Rudnick Polstein. *Film Editor:* Paul Rubell. *Production Designer:* Graham Grace Walker. *Director of Photography:* William A. Fraker. *Produced by:* Edward R. Pressman. *Based on the Novel by:* H.G. Wells. *Screenplay by:* Richard Stanley, Ron Hutchinson. *Directed by:* John Frankenheimer. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A survivor of a Red Cross expedition, Edward Douglas (Thewlis) is rescued adrift at sea by a scientist, Montgomery (Kilmer), and taken back to a remote island where wild man-beasts run wild, controlled by implants. This is the domain of Dr. Moreau (Brando), an insane and notorious geneticist who has abandoned civilization and taken his work to the wild. Moreau is known as "Father" by the intelligent humanimals that populate the island, but many of the beasts plan an insurrection against him and his draconian laws. Meanwhile, Edward finds himself attracted to Aissa (Balk), Moreau's "daughter," a girl of definite feline qualities.

COMMENTARY: "This is the most outrageous spectacle I have ever seen!" a character reports in the third big-screen adaptation of H.G. Wells' 1896 novel, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, following films in 1933 and 1977.

And indeed, he could be referring to this crazy movie itself, which in production was the victim of enormous on-set strife, huge ego clashes and on release received vitriolic critical reviews. Yet movies need not be judged exclusively by how they are widely received, nor by behind-the-scenes tales of woe, which inevitably

come down to personal agendas. On the contrary, a movie is best judged by what ends up *on screen*: the narrative, the approach, the context of the words and images themselves.

It is indeed of interest to know that original director Richard Stanley (*Hardware* [1990], *Dust Devil* [1992]) was fired and replaced by John Frankenheimer. Or that lead actor Val Kilmer switched roles and was replaced first by Rob Morrow and then by David Thewlis. It's endlessly amusing to read the gossipy accounts of Kilmer-Frankenheimer clashes, or Brando-Kilmer clashes, and these tensions no doubt contributed in some way what appears on-screen.

But ultimately, a movie is a text unto itself, and the making of the movie is another story altogether. And, released on the centennial of Wells' original novel, *Island of Dr. Moreau* is a crazy, inventive tapestry of nastiness and social commentary.

Like the original novel, this adaptation focuses on animal experimentation, though the surgical experimentation and vivisectionist concerns of Wells' era have given way to genetic manipulation and concerns about eugenics.

In both the novel and the film, a once-esteemed and brilliant scientist has fled society-at-large over animal rights issues and resumed his experiments to alter the very shape of life itself. The 1996 film generates significant energy, however, based on a real-life scientific development, the HGP or Human Genome Project, an endeavor launched in 1990 to map and sequence all the genes in human DNA. Many people saw the HGP as the equivalent of the discovery of atomic power, the opening of a new age in man's history. The dawn of genetic research brought up ethical questions such as:

Can new forms of life be created? If life can be mapped, can it be replicated? Might genetic weapons be made to spread diseases, either known or newly created? If a genetic basis can be described for criminal behavior might criminals come to be seen as victims of their genes rather than violators of the law?⁶⁴

From its opening credits, a dazzling montage of DNA, life's beginning as a fetus, and even pulsing animal organs, this *The Island of Dr. Moreau* obsesses on such important questions. Dr. Moreau's stated goal is no less than the removal of "evil" from life on Earth. He describes the Devil as "genes" and notes that he has seen the Devil "in the microscope" and chained him. He believes he can eradicate the destructive elements found in the human psyche and make a creature "incapable of malice."

The irony is that to modify life, Moreau must also *control* life. The humanoid-animals he has "evolved" on his island have no freedom and are ruthlessly controlled by behavior modification implants. In attempting to destroy evil and malice, Moreau has actually set himself up as God and altered the very destiny of the animals he hoped to improve. Many of them don't want the burden of being human, of being civilized. As one creature meaningfully notes, "to go on two legs is very hard."

And this is where, indeed, Moreau is a devil. He has introduced the knowledge of morality and law to creatures who once existed outside such knowledge. They lived only by the law of the jungle, doing what they had to survive without judging the inherent goodness or badness of each act. Survival was all that mattered before Moreau, but now this new "father" has fed them the apple from the tree of knowledge. They understand now how to contextualize their behaviors, to view them in a larger moral universe, and to live within this is, indeed hard.

What makes *Island of Moreau* such an odd and yet imaginative film is Brando's unconventional portrayal of the misguided genius. His wardrobe alone reveals the odd nature of the man. During one scene, he wears a pointed hat, surgical gloves and a giant white kimono. In another sequence, he adorns a hat that's one part attire and one-part ice-bucket. The audience's first view of Moreau finds the man behind mosquito-netting, ensconced behind sun-glasses and white pancake sun-screen because he can't tolerate the sun.

In other words, he is a literalization of the concept of God: that the divine works in mysterious ways that the rest of us don't understand. But the odd wardrobe also notes, in some fashion, the creative freedom of man. Unshackled from restrictive rules, he can do anything, even design the strangest wardrobe in human history. He does so, apparently, because he desires it. The humanimals, by contrast, do not apparently merit the same consideration. They are hemmed in by laws and "pain," meaning that they can't be as free, or as idiosyncratic, as Moreau.

The Island of Dr. Moreau also gives Brando's character a half-pint shadow, a mini-version of himself that follows him around. This too is a literalization of the God concept: that God creates creatures in his own image. Is the creature odd? Yes it is (which is why *South Park* has lampooned the movie's Moreau and his mini-me). But the creature also reveals that, unfettered by the governing rules of society, Moreau can do anything what he wants. His vanity compels him to create these creatures, whereas in civilization, society would put a brake on such individual sport.

The Island of Dr. Moreau gazes not just at man as God, but at the necessity of law if there is to be true civilization. The humanimals receive pain if they disobey the law; and in our society, those who break the law also face consequences of "pain": imprisonment, financial fine, or even death. Yet the movie is also smart enough to realize the hypocrisy of law, especially the death penalty. Commit violence, and the state will kill you. That's Father's (Moreau's) law too, and the humanimals, having grown intelligent, grow aware of the contradiction there. They come to realize that they are being controlled.

The Island of Dr. Moreau has always been a "science run amok" cautionary tale, but in the 1990s, the context of gene manipulation gives the tale a new life, a new plausibility and a new sense of fear. For the first time in the history since Wells' 1896 novel, the humanimals, so-called "chimeras," are actually within reach of our science. "As we enter a new era in biotechnology, with sequencing of the entire human genome near completion and technological manipulation of those genes advancing at exponential rates, will such creatures remain myths?"⁶⁴ asks scholar Mark Jangels in his piece, "Dr. Moreau Has Left the Island: Dealing with Human-Animal Patents in the 21st Century."

Frankenheimer's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* ends with an explicit warning "to all who would follow in Moreau's footsteps." The warning is not to play God, because the eccentricities of the individual, like the eccentricities of Moreau, will inevitably play out as being "devilish" in those created. And the devil, eventually, is always despised.

It's popular to dislike and attack *The Island of Dr. Moreau* because it is so damned weird, because it is as self-indulgent and idiosyncratic as Marlon Brando's Moreau himself. There's a scene in which Montgomery, played by Val Kilmer, attempts to become "God" by doing a Brando impersonation. There's a nightmare during which CGI rats attack David Thewlis's character and the movie doesn't even give us a "stay awake" shot to let us know that it's a dream. There's a scene of Montgomery smoking weed with the humanimals. At one point, Moreau and his diminutive homunculus play a piano duet.

These weird touches may not make *The Island of Dr. Moreau* a great movie, but they do make it an unforgettable viewing experience. Very often, critics speak of the cookie-cutter or block-buster mentality of big genre movies like this. That mentality consists of several things, but most notably an absolute resistance to taking chances, to stepping out of mainstream visuals and narrative innovations.

The Island of Dr. Moreau, a Hollywood remake, is balls-to-the-

walls nuts. As a movie it's as fundamentally off its rocker as its main character. In this fashion, the movie's form reflects its content, but more than that, goes against the very conventions of its time. Making the movie must have been a nightmare.

But a nightmare that gave birth to something absolutely out-of-the-norm and brazen in its defiance of our expectations. If *The Island of Dr. Moreau* fails, at least it fails on its own terms, by being *too* odd and quirky. Not by being the typical pabulum of the day.

***Mary Reilly* * ***

Critical Reception

"This is the best version of the Jekyll and Hyde story ever put on the screen— and it is a wonderful movie."—David Thomson, *Have You Seen?*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, page 529

" *Mary Reilly* ultimately succeeds despite Roberts and Close. With a better lead actress the film might have been a masterpiece. As it stands the film is a modern Gothic classic which certainly shouldn't be missed."—Julian Knott, *Shivers* #29, May 1996, page 17

Cast and Crew

CAST: Julia Roberts (Mary Reilly); John Malkovich (Dr. Henry Jekyll); George Cole (Mr. Puole); Michael Gambon (Mary's Father); Kathy Staff (Miss Kent); Glenn Close (Mrs. Faraday); Michael Sheen (Bradshaw); Bronagh Gallagher (Amie); Linda Bassett (Mary's Mother); Ciaran Hinds (Sir Danvers Carew); Sasha Hanou (Young Mary); Tim Barlow (Vicar)

CREW: Tristar Pictures Presents a film by Stephen Frears. *Castings:* Leo Davis, Juliet Taylor. *Music:* George Fenton. *Costume Designer:* Conolata Boyle. *Film Editor:* Lesley Walker. *Production Designer:* Stuart Craig. *Director of Photography:* Philippe Rousselot. *Executive Producer:* Lynn Pleshette. *Co-Producer:* Iain Smith. *Based on the novel by:* Valerie Martin. *Produced by:* Ned Tanen, Nancy Graham Tanen. *Produced by:* Norma Heyman. *Written by:* Christopher Hampton. *Directed by:* Stephen Frears. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:*

SYNOPSIS: Mary Reilly (Roberts), a young servant in the house of reclusive Dr. Jekyll (Malkovich), begins to form a rapport with her unusual master. Soon, however, Dr. Jekyll mysteriously announces to the house's staff that the home will have a new boarder, a young student named Mr. Hyde (Malkovich). The mysterious Hyde, a brute, soon causes a stir in the house, and seems to be aware of all Mary's confidences to Dr. Jekyll. Before long, a local madam, Mrs. Faraday (Close), begins to complain about Hyde's behavior at the whore-house. And then, Mary becomes aware of Hyde's violent side ... his propensity for murder.

COMMENTARY: *Mary Reilly* is an intriguing and handsome but not entirely satisfying reiteration of the Jekyll/Hyde mythos. The Stephen Frears film probably works best when it focuses on Hyde (John Malkovich) as a walking-talking metaphor for alcoholism. Poor Mary Reilly was tortured by her father, a drunk, in childhood and now, as an adult, she faces the same prospects from her employer, Dr. Jekyll. In both cases, drink brings out or "frees" another person inside the drinker, and that's a fascinating idea that still has currency in today's society.

But where *Mary Reilly* fails is in landing a late-20th century woman in 19th century London. Julia Roberts' Mary can read, for instance. She also starts up a friendship with her employer, Dr. Jekyll, and has full run of the house. Late in the film, when she feels neglected by Jekyll, she even acts petulant and moody, and quite simply such passive-aggressive behavior would have been a non-starter with a man of his standing.



Mary Reilly (Julia Roberts) meets the capricious and crude Mr. Hyde (John Malkovich) in Stephen Frears' *Mary Reilly* (1996).

Ultimately, this portrayal isn't realistic given real life history, and it would have been better to cast a younger actress in the role: one who could project greater naiveté while flagrantly flouting the household rules. Roberts' Mary Reilly has more presence, more confidence and more brashness than her station in life would realistically permit. Remember, the situation here isn't just about an employer and an employee, it's about class differences, and those are never overcome with the ease depicted in *Mary Reilly*.

Alarminglly, director Stephen Frears has selected the wrong visual approach to depict the story of Mary in Jekyll's

house. All throughout the opening credits, we witness shots of Mary going about her hard work in Jekyll's house: doing the laundry, preparing food, and buzzing about in the study. She is always front and center in Frears' compositions, the clear anchor of every last shot. Unfortunately, this visual prominence contradicts the truth of Mary's position in the house.

It would have been more effective and truthful were she instead consistently depicted in the background, in the corners of the frame, peering in from the outside at an affluence and station she doesn't and will never share.

But hey, the production paid for Julia Roberts, so she's going to

get in the center of the frame, right? If Roberts seems miscast as a 19th century servant, Glenn Close does no better with the role of a brothel's madam. She plays the role big and broad and comes across like a cartoon (a dress rehearsal, perhaps, for Cruella De Ville).

Malkovich, on the other hand, is terrific and appropriately dissolute as Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde, a man who "wanted the night" and is plagued by dark desires. Malkovich always seems to have something going on behind the eyes; his characters universally boast an internal sense of life and dimension. With a more prominent role, he could have been one of the greatest Jekyll/ Hyde's in history, instead of merely a supporting character.

In terms of 1990s horror movie trends, *Mary Reilly* repeats the same approach as *Bram Stoker's Dracula* or even, to a lesser degree, *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*: it romanticizes much surrounding a famous movie monster, thereby softening the edges of the tale, attempting to bring conventional "respectability" to a story that just needs to be told straight, monster and all. An unanswered question of horror films of the 1990s: is it really necessary to re-parse *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* or *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as love stories?



Mr. Hyde (Malkovich) gets physical with Mary (Roberts) in *Mary Reilly*.



Left to right: Director Stephen Frears, production designer Stuart Craig and director of photography Phillipe Rousselot during the making of Tri Star's retelling of the Dr. Jekyll story, *Mary Reilly* (1996).

Then again, this was the decade of *Titanic*. So much of *Mary Reilly* is gorgeous and impressive. It is particularly interesting how history repeats itself for Mary with the symbolic breaking of a cup in the presence of the two most important men in her life, first her father, and then Jekyll.

From a certain angle, Reilly is both an enabler and a victim, going through life in thrall to men possessed by internal demons. Again, that's fascinating and very true, probably, to a lot of women in the 19th century. It's just too bad that Julia Roberts and the screenplay play this character as such a 20th century woman.

***Necronomicon: Book of the Dead* * * . (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: "The Library": Jeffrey Combs (H.P. Lovecraft); Tony Azito (Librarian); Juan Fernandez (Attendant); Brian Yuzna (Cabbie). "The Drowned": Bruce Payne (Edward De Lapoer); Belinda Bauer (Nancy Gallmore); Richard Lynch (Jethro De Lapoer); Maria Ford (Clara);

Peter Jasienski (Jethro's Son); William Jess Russell (Doctor); Denice D. Lewis (Emma De La Poer). "The Cold": David Warner (Dr. Madden); BessMeyer (Emily Osterman); Millie Perkins (Lena); Dennis Christopher (Dale Porke); Gary Graham (Sam); Curt Lowens (Mr. Hawkins). "Whispers": Signy Coleman (Sarah); Obba Babatunde (Paul); Don Calfa (Mr. Benedict); Judith Drake (Mrs. Benedict).

CREW: New Line, August Films and Samuel Hadida presents a David/Yuzna Film. *Casting:* Jeffery Passero. *Production Designer:* Anthony Tremblay. *Music:* Daniel Licht, Joseph Lo Duca. *Costume Designer:* Ida Gearon. *Directors of Photography:* Russ Brandt, Gerry Lively. *Film Editors:* Christopher Roth, Keith H. Sauter. *Executive Producer:* Takashige Ischise. *Produced by:* Samuel Hadida, Brian Yuzna. *Written by:* Brent Friedman, Christophe Gans, Kazunori Ito, Brian Yuzna. Based on the works of H.P. Lovecraft. *Directed by:* Christophe Gans ("The Drowned"), Shosuke Kaneko ("The Cold"), and Brian Yuzna ("The Library," "Whispers"). *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Author Howard P. Lovecraft (Combs) visits the library where monks control the possession of the sacred, ancient text, *The Necronomicon*. Then Lovecraft illicitly reads from the book. In the first tale, "Drowned," he learns of Edward De Lapoer (Payne), a man who purchases his ancestral Oceanside home, only to find that Jethro De Lapoer (Lynch) once attempted to resurrect the dead but brought forth only a deceitful monster from the sea. In the second tale, "Cold," Lovecraft learns of a mysterious New Yorker, Dr. Madden (Warner), who attempted strange experiments with human spinal fluid to prolong his own life. In the third tale, "Whispers," Lovecraft reads about two cops, Sarah (Coleman) and Paul (Batatunde), who stumble upon a murderer called "The Butcher," and a strange man, Benedict (Calfa), who leads them into a subterranean Hell where monstrous bat-like creatures wait to devour the living.

COMMENTARY: Many filmmakers have attempted to adapt the literary works of H.P. Lovecraft to film without much success (see: *Lurking Fear*, *The Unnamable II*).

The anthology film *Necronomicon* actually does a credible job, however, of translating the essential aesthetic qualities of this unusual artist to the visual medium, in the process evoking a sense of a dark

universe, and hellish, monstrous creatures existing just beyond the fringes of human imagination.

The first tale, Christophe Gans' "The Drowned," incorporates elements from a variety of Lovecraft short tales, combining the family, the De Lapoers, from "Rats in the Walls" (1924) with the seaside setting of "The Strange High House in the Mist" (1931) and the disgusting, monstrous sea-life of *The Shadow over Innsmouth* (1931).

Bruce Payne plays the heir who inherits a gloomy hotel overlooking the sea. He's a tragic figure who, after the drowning death of his wife, proceeds to make the same, *Pet Semetary*— styled mistake as his ancestor, Jethro, played by the inestimable Richard Lynch in one of his finest performances.

The climax of this tale is rousing, with Payne's character in the atrium of his hotel battling a giant octopus-like beast that can shape its tentacles into human form. The monster looks convincing and disgusting, and the action is thrilling. The message of the tale is that there is no short-cut out of grief, no respite from mourning, when a loved one dies. The story also memorably features Lovecraft's well-known incantation from the *Necronomicon* (a fictional work): "That is not dead which can eternal lie/and with strange aeons even death may die."

The second story, an adaptation of Lovecraft's "Cool Air" (1928), renames the Spanish Dr. Munoz as Dr. Madden and casts the imposing and always-impressive David Warner in the role. This is one of Lovecraft's most famous stories, and yet, on screen, the tale doesn't quite work. There is a horrific moment, later in the proceedings, during which a woman "undead" describes having carried a not-yet-born but alive baby in her womb for years. She can feel it kick, and this is a powerful image. It's just hard to believe that the "obsessed with his work" Madden would fall in love with the story's young waif, Emily (Meyer).

Necronomicon's third tale, "Whispers" is based on "Whisperer in Darkness" (1930) but very, very loosely. The filmed story, about two cops descending into an underworld, is dazzling in visualization and overall mood. The story may not make more than a modicum of sense, but the gruesome, macabre work of Lovecraft is brought to vivid life nonetheless in a story that depicts strange bat-like creatures feeding on human bone marrow and absorbing human brains.

In this story, walls bleed, human babies grow in translucent bat wombs, and the bat-creatures speak in human voices through what look like vaginal openings. There's even a disturbing scene in which a human body—with its brain just scooped out—jitters around, undead.

Again, nothing about "Whispers" makes much sense, but Yuzna has a field day with the imagery, with the blood, guts and monsters.

Holding *Necronomicon* together in the wrap-around segment is the great Jeffrey Combs, virtually unrecognizable in heavy make-up as H.P. Lovecraft himself. Combs often lends a subversive, edgy quality to his performances, and this turn is no exception. Combs imbues Lovecraft with Herbert West's obsession and Bruce Campbell's physical dexterity, and the interpretation is memorable. The impression you come away with is a man who would battle the forces of Hell itself for a peek at forbidden knowledge.

There is some temporal weirdness in *Necronomicon*. The story proper, with Lovecraft in the library, is set in 1932. Yet the third story he reads from in the *Necronomicon* is obviously set in the 1990s. The cars, the uniforms, the hospital room and the technology all make this fact plain.

So essentially, Lovecraft is reading about something that has not occurred yet. But before audiences can shout continuity error, they must remain mindful of the movie's opening narration, which notes that the *Necronomicon* includes in its pages the secrets of the universe, both past "and future." Perhaps that's the key to why Lovecraft can read of a tale 60 years in his future. And come to think of it, "Cool Air" occurs in late 20th century America too...

The first and third stories in *Necronomicon* are strong, for very different reasons, and only the relative dullness of the second installment drags the film down. As far as Lovecraft adaptations go, this one gets at the beating, bloody heart of things in a way at least satisfactory.

*Night of the Demons 3 **

Cast and Crew

CAST: Amelia Kinkade (Angela); Kris Holdenreid (Vince); Gregory Calpakis (Nick); Patricia Rodriguez (Abbie); Stephanie Bauder (Holly); Tara Slone (Lois); Christian Tester (Orson); Joel Gordon (Reggie); Larry Day (Larry) Vlasta Vrana (Det. Dewhurst); Ian McDonald (Quicky Mart Clerk); Richard Zeman (Macho Cop); Minor Mustain (Veteran Cop); Richard Jutras (Rookie Cop).

CREW: Fries/Schultz Film Group in association with Via Appia

communications presents a Flanders Film production, a film by Jimmy Kaufman. *Casting*: Elite Productions, Nadia Rona. *Costume Designer*: Claire Geoffrion. *Film Editors*: Daniel Duncan, Kevin S. Tenney. *Production Designer*: David Blanchard. *Music*: Raymond C. Fabi. *Director of Photography*: Walter Bal. *Co-Producer*: Julie Allan. *Executive Producers*: Walter Josten, Jeff Geoffray. *Written by*: Kevin S. Tenney. *Produced by*: Claudio Castravelli. *Directed by*: Jimmy Kaufman. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 81 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On the way to a Halloween dance, four juvenile delinquents and two teenage girls involved in a breakdown on the side of the road become involved in a convenience-store shoot-out with police. Led by the vicious Vince (Hold-enreid), the gang takes an injured comrade, Reggie (Gordon), to Hull House, the funeral home haunted by the demonic Angela (Kinkade). One-by-one, Angela picks off the thugs and the girls, malevolently gathering souls. Nick (Calpakis) and Holly (Bauder) join up with Detective Dewhurst (Vrana) and attempt to survive the trick or treats of Angela's Halloween night.

COMMENTARY: Another franchise scrapes the bottom of the direct-to-video barrel in the cheap-jack *Night of the Demons 3*. The film's opening credit sequence features some very bad, very cheap CGI animation that pictures digital ghosts arising from a graveyard, swooping through Hull House, and finally passing through what appears to be an orange black hole down one of the funeral home's endless corridors.

The same few shots of the ghosts flying from the graveyard into the vortex are repeated endlessly in a very short span here and have absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the film's plot, since there are no actual black holes anywhere in the film proper.

Unless you count the narrative, that is.

After this bizarre and unrelated opening credits sequence, the film introduces four juvenile delinquents joy-riding in their van. Down to a person, they all look like heroin addicts from an Eastern Bloc country, cuss a lot, and are lit in lurid shades.

Before long, there's a shoot-out at a convenience store that also seems unconnected to anything else, and then the film settles down in

Hull House. This time out, evil Angela is bent on turning the juveniles into animal demons for some reason. A girl named Abbie becomes a cat demon after Angela taunts her with the line "cat got your tongue?" Another girl, Lois, is transformed into a snake.

Well, technically that last sentence isn't true. Lois isn't really transformed into a snake. One of Lois's *arms* is transformed into a snake ... but it's really just a poor-fitting glove.

Simultaneously, Reggie survives half-the-film with a gunshot wound to the chest, and an old detective, Dewhurst, drives aimlessly about all night, until reaching Hull House. "It's time to return to the bowels of Hell," Angela tells her demon recruits at one point, and that might as well be the mantra of *Night of the Demons 3*, a film that—even at 81 minutes—feels like eternal damnation.

Perhaps realizing the paucity of storyline at hand, *Night of the Demons 3* is a more overtly sexual film than either of its predecessors, and that's amusing in a prurient way. Angela performs a seductive dance at one point early on, and then sexually seduces Abbie, proving she's a bi-sexual demon, I guess.

But the best scene in the film, and a legitimately funny one at that, finds the evil Angela attempting to seduce a boy named Orson. Rather brazenly, he asks the sexy dominatrix if she can suck a golf ball through a hose. In response, Angela man-handles the pistol in Orson's grip, and then perform fellatio upon the muzzle. After this long, drawn-out simulation of oral sex, Angela opens her mouth and spits out four bullets.

Wow.

The film gets a full star for that scene. The rest of the movie is drivel.

***Pinocchio's Revenge* * * . (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Rosalind Allen (Jennifer Garrick); Todd Allen (David Kaminsky); Aaron Lustig (Dr. Edwards); Ron Canada (Barry); Candace McKenzie (Sophia); Lewis Van Barga (Vincent Gotto); Larry Cedar (D.A.); Brittany Alyse Smith (Zoe); Ivan Gueron (Rookie Patrolman); Thomas Wagner (Homicide Detective); Janis Chow (Newscaster); Sarah Katie Coughlan (School Teacher); Michael Connors (Young

Priest); Verne Troyer (Pinocchio Double); Dani Blair (Mother at Party); Larry Zieglmeyer (Principal); James W. Quinn (Paramedic); Dick Beals (Voice of Pinocchio).

CREW: Trimark Pictures Presents a Blue Rider Production, a Kevin S. Tenney Film. *Casting:* Tedra Gabriel. *Pinocchio Effects:* Gabe Bartalos. *Production Designer:* Candi Guterres. *Music:* Dennis Michael Tenney. *Co-Producer:* Jonathan Komack Martin. *Co-Executive Producer:* Andrew Hersh. *Director of Photography:* Eric Anderson. *Film Editor:* Daniel Duncan. *Executive Producer:* Mark Amin. *Producer:* Jeff Geoffrey, Walter Josten. *Written and directed by:* Kevin S. Tenney. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A dedicated defense attorney, Jennifer Garrick (Allen), tries to get a stay of execution for her serial killer client, Vincent Gotto (VanBargen). He killed his own son but also buried a strange Pinocchio puppet at the scene of the crime, in Tampa, ten years ago. Through an odd turn of events, that very puppet ends up the surprise birthday presents of Jennifer's troubled daughter, Zoe (Smith). Very soon, Zoe's rage about Jennifer's new boyfriend, David (Allen), and separation from her biological father finds an outlet in the murderous actions of Pinocchio.

COMMENTARY: At first blush, *Pinocchio's Revenge* seems like a low rent Chucky movie, with an armed, malevolent puppet jumping to life attacking and killing people. Yet that simplistic description may not do this Kevin Tenney film justice. Though *Pinocchio's Revenge* is undoubtedly one of the 1990s' "grim fairy tale" horror movie pack, of a piece with *Leprechaun*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *Jack Frost*, *Jack-O*, and *Uncle Sam*, it deliberately eschews the more superficial trappings of that restrictive formula and builds a rather disturbing case for the existence of evil in, of all places, our children.

Pinocchio's Revenge opens with an atmospheric, well-orchestrated scene. A police car on the road during a rainy night nearly crashes into a parked vehicle on the shoulder. The rookie cop exits the car, grabs a flashlight, and steps into a primeval-looking forest. He soon discovers a dark figure (whose face remains hidden) burying his young son's corpse in the muddy earth. Oddly, he is also burying a large Pinocchio puppet.

From there, the movie skips ahead ten years and introduces us to busy, career-oriented Jennifer Garrick and her lonely daughter, Zoe. Jennifer is recently divorced, and Zoe is in therapy because of it. Her psychologist calls her a "very disturbed little girl." With Zoe's Dad out of her life, the girl is afraid of losing her Mom too, especially because Jennifer has a new boyfriend, David.

When Zoe ends up with Pinocchio as a birthday present (in a rather far-fetched fashion), the doll promptly begins to function as the child's id. Pinocchio pushes David down the stairs, and when the boyfriend survives that incident, the puppet kills him at the local hospital. Pinocchio also kills Sophia, the lovely in-home nanny/housekeeper. He tells Zoe that she is his Blue Fairy, the being who can turn him into a "real boy."

In one scene set in her therapist's office, Zoe and Pinocchio argue about who is to blame for all the terrible violence, particularly as it relates to David. The first time Tenney stages this scene, we see the puppet's mouth move; he is clearly conversing with the girl.

But during the videotape playback (for Jennifer), the conversation is entirely one-way: Zoe is talking to an unmoving, unblinking, doll. The madness, we are left to believe, is inside her. As the Blue Fairy, she turned Pinocchio into a real boy, all right, one embodying and enacting all of her dark psychological impulses.

This interesting idea is reinforced a few times in the film. When Jennifer is stalked in her home by a killer with a butcher knife, that killer is revealed to be ... Zoe, purportedly "defending" her from Pinocchio. When a victim is struck by a fireplace poker, we don't see the perpetrator: it could be Zoe since the blow comes from a low angle.

And finally, during the last battle between Pinocchio and Jennifer, Mom hurls the malevolent puppet though a glass-top coffee table. Yet in the aftermath of the incident, it is Zoe's form we saw sprawled in the wreckage. Pinocchio is nowhere to be seen.

A line of dialogue in the film insists that "evil comes in all shapes and sizes," and the implication here is that Pinocchio is the receptacle for Zoe's darkest impulses, just as it was once the receptacle for Gotto's son. In both cases, the parents attempt to deny the evil they see in their children and find a scapegoat for bad behavior, the puppet itself. In the heat of the moment, Jennifer blames Pinocchio, and thus "sees" Pinocchio as the murderer instead of her daughter. After the battle is over, she sees more clearly: she sees that she was fighting Zoe.

Pinocchio's Revenge courageously ends on a down note. At the therapist's urging, Jennifer commits Zoe to an insane asylum. The evil

within her can't be exorcised or otherwise released. She's mentally ill.

That's a very, very dark ending for what is ostensibly a movie about a doll going around killing people. Instead, this movie has more in common, tonally, with a work like *The Good Son*: a film that gazes at how parents sometimes cover for misbehaving children and how a child's innocent façade can mask something frightening.

Pinocchio's Revenge doesn't execute this premise flawlessly, but the movie does have its moments. The final battle is tense, the opener is intriguing, and the movie dutifully gets in its licks about parents, children, "media hype" (the tabloid culture of the 1990s) and other points of interest. In terms of logic, one has to wonder about Jennifer's parenting skills since she allows her beloved child to keep a puppet that was once the property of a serial killer.

But then again, maybe that last bit is the point of *Pinocchio's Revenge*.

In the 1990s, the U.S. government studied the effects of violence on kids. Specifically how violence on television allegedly impacted children's learning of aggressive behaviors and de-sensitization towards violence. In regards to *Pinocchio's Revenge*, a disturbed child like Zoe does not need the influence of Pinocchio (a surrogate for TV?) in her life (just as children don't need to watch adult scary movies either) but the so-called adults around her fail to act responsibly.

Jennifer's so busy on the job, she doesn't take an interest in Zoe and Pinocchio until it is much too late. Pinocchio is something harmful and it comes right into the home and becomes a best friend. Just like a violent TV program, or an action figure from a violent TV program. How are children to accommodate these new friends? That's the question.

Pinocchio's Revenge may be a little wooden at times, to use a cliché, but it tries hard to be a real horror movie.

***The Sandman* . (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: A.J. Richards (Gary); Rita Gutowski (Maris); Terry J. Lipko (Bud); James Vironi (Zachariah); Barbara Katz-Norrod (Mrs. Martinak); Matthew Jason Walsh (Ozzy); Mary Wilkerson (Bizarre); Jennifer Barrett (Bimbo Model); Lisa Neeld (Bedelia); Nicholas Cleland

(Pugsley); James L. Edwards (Gerald Rivers); Lawrence Latsko (Joyner); George Abrams (Hershberger); Hal Vandersall (Hooper); Stan Fitzgerald (The Sandman); Douglas Bouslough (Merle); Jennifer Mullen (Slutty Metal Chick).

CREW: A production of The Suburban Tempe Company, a J.R. Bookwalter Film. *Casting:* Linda Weaver. *Director of Photography:* Ron Bonk. *Associate Producers:* Ariauna Albright, Barbara Katz-Norrod. *Produced by:* James L. Edwards, Linda Weaver. *Story by:* J.K. Bookwalter, David Lange, Matthew Jason Walsh. *Written by:* Matthew Jason Walsh, J.R. Bookwalter. *Produced, Directed and Edited by:* J.R. Bookwalter. *MPAA Rating:* NA. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: While an epidemic of sleep deaths sweep America, insomnia strikes Gary (Richards), a struggling writer living in the Ridgeway Trailer Park. Before long, Gary learns from his crazy neighbor, Zachariah (Viront), that the Sandman is responsible for the sleep deaths, and that the angel of death arrives by night, provides beautiful dreams ... and then sucks the souls out of unwary sleepers. Gary visits his bickersome girlfriend, Maris (Gutowksi), and interrupts the Sandman before he has the chance to kill her. Now Gary and his friend Bud (Lipko) must find a way to end the supernatural killings.

COMMENTARY: A grim fairy tale-styled, lowbudget horror flick, *The Sandman* is not even professional grade shlock material. Instead, this independently-made, amateurish film is a sort of *Nightmare on Elm Street* on the cheap. And do I mean cheap!

There have been plenty of low-budget indie horror films that overcome their monetary deficits, but *The Sandman* is not one of them. Instead, the film relies on a moronic, insipid sense of humor to carry much of the running time and deals with characters who are so far over-the-top that they literally become unwatchable.

Zachariah—a crazy Vietnam veteran—is one such character. Old Lady Martinak is another. They are drawn in such clichéd, poorly-acted terms, you can't get behind the movie's reality. A belching fat kid? A second cousin, Ozzie, who sucks his thumb when he sleeps? This is supposed to be character color?

The movie's boogeyman, The Sandman, doesn't actually rear his ugly head until the thirty-six minute point, so there's nothing to hold

onto as the film flails from one ostensibly dramatic scene to another. Several such sequences involve a trash tabloid talk show, "The Gerald Rivers Show" (get it?), and are so lame and badly staged that they resemble public access television more than even the cheapest daily talk show.

The gags on the show-within-a-movie aren't funny, either. Each time we see the host and his combative guests, they are more bruised and bandaged than the last time, a reference to the 1998 incident on *Geraldo* in which the host's nose was broken on air during a battle between white supremacists, black activists and Jewish activists.

The Sandman looks like a very ambitious student or fan film but not the product of artists with something interesting (or even disgusting) to say. I suppose one could argue that the notion and appearance of the Sandman may be indicative of our society's desire to find truth in old tradition, in stories handed down for generations, even as the culture becomes more and more technology-based, isolating and lurid (as evidenced by the talk show). But that single sentence gives more thought to the film's thematic possibilities than Bookwalter's screenplay.

The Sandman is tough, tedious going. Watching it, you'll suffer the opposite of Gary's insomnia. You'll do anything to go to sleep, to shut down and leave the silly trailer park behind. A visit from the Sandman, just not this movie's vision of the Sand-man, would come as a great relief.

Scream * * * *

Critical Reception

"Pretty potent.... [A]t times it's almost as nastily nihilistic as Craven's early, unsparing movies like *The Last House on the Left* and *The Hills Have Eyes*."— Glenn Kenny, *Premiere Magazine*, Summer 1997

"It's sensational in both senses of the word: a bravura, provocative send-up of horror pictures that's also scary and gruesome yet too swift-moving to lapse into morbidity. It risks going way over the top, deliberately generating considerable laughter in the process. It ends up a terrific entertainment that

also explores the relationship between movies and their audiences, specifically—yet hardly exclusively—teenagers who love the kind of horror pictures Craven specializes in."—Kevin Thomas, *The Los Angeles Times*, "Craven's *Scream* a Bravura Send-up of Horror Pictures"

"As a blending of slasher film series like the *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, and the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, with dashes of humor and self-referential winks to the camera, this is entertaining enough but the fact that it spawned sequels is perfect evidence of Hollywood feeding on itself. Wes Craven would have been better off conjuring up some new frights (or would we have been better off?). It's never boring, there are some good laughs—its parody so highly polished that it becomes what it parodies—that's either something wonderfully good or wonderfully bad. This was like having a sequel to a bunch of other franchises all bundled into one—but a new Freddy Krueger movie, wouldn't that have been more satisfying? But we have *Scream* to thank for *Halloween: H20*, and that's certainly a worthy result."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"Despite the backlash that came later, and even though it became dated rather quickly, we should not discount the impressive feat that Wes Craven pulled off here, redefining the slasher flick for a '90s audience and giving us an unprecedented deconstruction of the modern horror movie in the process."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Drew Barrymore (Casey Becker); David Arquette (Deputy Dewey); Neve Campbell (Sidney Prescott); Courtney Cox (Gale Weathers); Matthew Lillard (Stu); Rose McGowan (Tatum); Skeet Ulrich (Billy); Jamie Kennedy (Randy); Liev Schreiber (Cotton Weary); Joseph Whipp (Sheriff Burke); W. Earl Brown (Kenny).

CREW: Dimension Films presents a Woods Entertainment Production, a Film by Wes Craven. *Casting:* Lisa Beach. *Costume Designer:* Cynthia Bergstrom. *Music:* Marco Beltrami. *Film Editor:*

Patrick Lussier. *Production Designer*: Bruce Alan Miller. *Director of Photography*: Mark Irwin. *Co-Executive Producer*: Stuart Besser. *Executive Producers*: Bob and Harvey Weinstein, Marianna Maddalena. *Produced by*: Cary Woods, Cathy Konrad. *Written by*: Kevin Williamson. *Directed by*: Wes Craven. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 111 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A costumed killer, Ghost Face, taunts and murders young Casey Becker (Barrymore) in idyllic Woodsboro, bringing a media circus to town, led by tabloid reporter Gale Weathers (Cox). While the local police, including dopey deputy Dewey (Arquette), attempt to solve the crime, the killer lines up his next victim: Sidney Prescott (Campbell). Sidney survives the attempt on her life and starts to realize that the murders have something to do with her mother, who was murdered a year ago. For a time, Sidney suspects that her boyfriend, Billy (Ulrich), may be the serial killer, but then the clues point in another direction.

COMMENTARY: *Scream* could be the ultimate tale of America's rapidly-coming-of-age "VCR generation." The youth culture depicted in Wes Craven's film, made from a literate, extremely witty screenplay by Kevin Williamson, are a pitch-perfect reflection of the mid-1990s.

Here, kids have cell phones, pagers, home computers and an encyclopedic knowledge of movie history. Unlike many adults, however, these children are cognizant that their technological toys and their easy access to information on the Internet or via old movies is not really helping people, not really making things better or saving a world on the precipice (Y2K was coming, remember).

Despite fax machines, MRIs and the Hubble, the world of the 1990s was still fraught with un-resolved problems. No cure had been discovered for AIDS, the national deficit was still tremendous, and Generation X'ers were not leaving college to begin \$40,000-a-year careers, as promised.

On the contrary, the young generation was learning firsthand that the artificially inflated prosperity of the Reagan Era was over and that they would likely be paying for the excesses of the 1980s for their adult life. Because of all this insight in 90s teens, the high schoolers profiled in *Scream* seem jaded and callous in the extreme. They aren't yuppies; this isn't about money. Instead, it's something different, an extreme self-involvement bordering on the obsessive. This is about leisure, entertainment and tabloid news becoming a way of life.

Take, for instance, Tatum's comment when Sidney remarks that the murdered Casey Becker sits next to her in English class. "Not anymore," she comments, straight-faced, more interested in a one-liner than in a fallen comrade.

There are other notable examples of generational callousness in *Scream*. Two students dress up as the killer, Ghost Face, and thoughtlessly parade on the school campus, not considering the impact of their actions. What they care about is their own entertainment, not the feelings of other students. When Principal Himbry is murdered, it is also a source of amusement to the teenagers, not an opportunity for empathy. They do not consider the principal a human being, only a nemesis, like the dean in *Animal House* (1979), for instance. His suffering children, parents or wife at a time like this never enter the equation. What's important is having a good time.

The moment of greatest cynicism occurs in the girl's high school rest room. A gorgeous blonde with a super-model physique suggests to her friend that Sidney Prescott is actually the Woodsboro murderer. She knowledgeably rattles off a complicated psychological argument for this revelation and then ironically reveals that the source of her information is *The Ricki Lake Show*, an afternoon talk show.

In scenes such as this, *Scream* suggests that because of intense, consistent exposure to tabloid television, movies and even music videos, the 1990 teen is incredibly smart and knowledgeable, put perhaps more importantly, callous and cynical. No doubt this is a defense mechanism of sorts. Teens in the 1990s had to be smart to understand new technologies like the Internet. But where was the moral guidance, the sense of community and empathy a nation seeks in its youth? Although Craven usually sees the next generation as representative of a better future, *Scream* suggests that the life of leisure afforded by VCRs, the world wide web, cell phones and the like have actually made some young adults unstable ... if not psychotic (in the case of Billy and Stu).



Stu (Matthew Lillard) and Tatum (Rose McGowan) contemplate the bloody murder of a classmate in *Scream*.

Scream is pitch-perfect not only in its depiction of the 1990s high school set (which in real life included the members of the Spur Posse, the Glen Ridge rapists, and the girl who gave birth at the prom and put her baby in a dumpster) but also in its self-aware, self-reflexive mode of expression. The film is wickedly smart, much like the kids it features.

The teens endlessly wonder about tabloid-style questions, like which celebrity will play them in the movie version of the Woodsboro massacre ("with my luck, they'll cast *Tori Spelling*"), comment that their lives are just like a movie. ("This is like *The Silence of the Lambs* when Jodie Foster kept having dreams of her dead father") or even gossip about stars (particularly Richard Gere and the recto-gerbil urban legend).

The kids in *Scream* are so familiar with movie lingo that they define the parameters of their relationships based on movie terms. Billy notes that because Sidney will not have sex with him, their relationship has become "edited for television." Sidney flashes a view of her breasts and replies that he will just have to settle for a "PG-13" relationship. On top of moments like these, *Scream* is virtually littered with references to movies of all varieties, from *Basic Instinct* and *Halloween* to *Clueless* (1995) and even *The Town That Dreaded Sundown*

(1977).

But, and this is what many *Scream*- haters don't understand, or willfully refuse to understand: the references serve a narrative purpose. Overall, and taken in whole, the allusions to film culture paint a picture of teens who were not really raised by their parents (who seem in *Scream* to constantly be going away on business). Instead, they were raised by Blockbuster Video and their babysitter, the VCR. To them, Jamie Lee Curtis might as well be the girl next door as a famous movie star. They are that familiar with the actress and her career.

And a reference to Jamie Lee Curtis, seen in a video store display for *Mother's Boys*, actually provides the key to solving the crime in *Scream*. The killer, Ghost Face, is also, as the conclusion reveals, a Momma's Boy.



Billy (Skeet Ulrich, left) taunts Randy (Jamie Kennedy, center) while Stu (Matthew Lillard) watches, *Scream*.

Craven expresses the importance of television (of media, more accurately) in 1990s teenage life by positioning TV sets in places of prominence in the frame, throughout the movie. When Casey Becker is tormented by the sadistic killer in the opening set piece, she ultimately seeks refuge between a corner wall and her TV set.

Questioned about *Halloween* and *Friday the 13th*, she is literally trapped between the TV and a hard place. When Randy, similarly,

stops to enlighten his friends about the "rules" of horror movies, he is deliberately positioned next to a large-screen TV which has been freeze-framed on an image from *Halloween*. As Randy lectures, Michael Myers' butcher knife (on the TV) points in his direction, suggesting that he too will be victims of media-savvy villains.

And, in the ultimate use of a TV set in the film, Sidney drops one on poor Stu's head. Parents always warn that watching too much TV or sitting too close to it is bad for a kid, and in Stu's case, his failure to learn that lesson is fatal.

All the action of the film's climactic party sequence is shown on a TV of sorts too, a video monitor belonging to cameraman Kenny in his van. So while the party-goers watch television (a horror movie), there is a camera watching them watch TV. Going one step further, the audience is also watching characters watching other characters and so on. Craven's world is thus an endless circle of TV viewership.

Delving deeper, it's not hard to extrapolate from *Scream* the way that every character is related to the world of mass media, the world of television. Gale Weathers is a celebrity, a TV tabloid news reporter. Sidney herself is forced to watch incidents from her life (involving her mother) unfold on TV. There is no aspect of these characters that does not in some way relate to popular media and Craven is documenting something important about American culture here. The TV generation has come of age only to discover (especially in Stu, Billy and Kenny's cases) that TV really is harmful to one's health.

Also noteworthy about *Scream* is the fact that Williamson's clever screenplay does not portray any traditional, healthy families. Billy Loomis (Skeet Ulrich) comes from a broken home. His mother left him after his father had an affair. Sidney also originates from a broken home, but her mother died. Tatum and Dewey's father is never depicted at all, and both of Stu's parents are missing in action (though he acknowledges that they will be mad at him when they learn what he's been up to). So another sub-text of *Scream* is the idea that parental absenteeism has left a generation of children to be raised by TV. With television as their role model and mentor, these kids think in terms of sitcom witticism and TV-style ethics.

Scream is a great horror film not only because it captures the essence of the young generation and is genuinely smart and knowledgeable, but because it shares the audience's ennui with formulaic horror pictures. It loves the slasher paradigm and yet simultaneously realizes it is played out. The film trots out all the same clichés that a generation has already seen in *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, etc., but then commendably spins those conventions around in

dazzling fashion. Randy is a movie buff and dutifully recounts in *Scream* all the rules of slasher films: no sex, no drugs, and don't say, "I'll be right back." *Scream* sets up these paradigm clichés like bowling pins and then knocks down each one in turn.

Sidney surrenders her virginity (a death warrant in the slasher paradigm) yet survives, and that's a twist too. A killer appears supernatural, but the murderer in *Scream* is no Shape, no boogeyman, just two clever kids working in tandem to terrorize a girls. Also, in one scene, Sidney—our smart, final girl—rails against horror movies. She argues that they are insulting because some stupid girl who "can't act" is always running up the stairs instead of out the front door. In the very next scene, Sidney is chased upstairs by the killer. *Scream* relentlessly lands characters in situations where they must act as if they themselves have landed in a horror movie.

"Who's there?" Barrymore's Casey Becker asks in *Scream's* inaugural scene and the killer immediately admonishes her for asking a dumb question. "Never ask who's there! It's a death wish. You might as well go outside to investigate a strange noise or something," he barks.

It is often true that the first ten minutes of a film are the most crucial in terms of generating positive or negative emotions in audience members. In other words, the audience is either hooked right off, or quickly becomes bored. In *Scream*, Craven makes an indelible first impression by staging the ultimate scary action piece. The scene involving Drew Barrymore's Casey plays on horror clichés but is terrifying nonetheless. A girl is home alone at night in a house dominated by giant windows. A stranger calls, and a killer lurks outside. Horribly, he is one step ahead of Casey throughout the scene. It is a ruthless set-up, brilliantly conceived and directed with tremendous flair. It is the scariest opening segment in any movie in 1990s history.

Going one step further than Hitchcock's *Psycho*, Craven and Williamson kill off their biggest star not in the first third of the picture, but in the first ten minutes. Another old cliché ramped up and revived for the fast-as-lightning information age of the 1990s.

Scream proved a tremendous box office hit and was a success with critics too. It spurred a revival and re-thinking of the slasher paradigm in the 1990s, and replaced the much-derided "Dead Teenager Movie" with the "Smart Dead Teenager Movie." Not a small accomplishment.

LEGACY: *Scream 2* (1997) followed fast on the heels of the 1996 original and was a box office hit as well. In 2000, the less well regarded *Scream 3* finished off the trilogy. In 2011, *Scream 4*, written by Kevin Williamson, directed by Wes Craven and starring Neve Campbell, Courteney Cox and David Arquette was released. The tagline for the return of Ghost Face in the 21st century: "New Decade. New Rules."

Screamers * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Peter Weller (Joe A. Henrickson); Jennifer Rubin (Jessica Hanson); Roy Dupuis (Becker); Andy Laver (Ace); Ron White (Elbarak); Charles Powell (Ross); Liliana Komorowska (Landowiska); Jason Cavalier (Leone); Leni Parker (Corporal Mc-Donald); Sylvaine Masse (NEB Soldier); Bruce Boa (Secretary Green).

CREW: Triumph Films Presents in association with Fuji 8 Film Company and Fries Film Company an Allegro Films Production, a Christian Duguay film. *Casting:* Mary and Karen Margiotta, Lucie Robitaille. *Music:* Normand Corbeil. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* Ernest Farino. *Digital Effects Supervisor:* Richard Ostiguy. *Director of Photography:* Rodney Gibbons. *Production Designer:* Perri Gorrara. *Film Editor:* Yves Langlois. *Executive Producer:* Charles W. Fries. *Based on the short story "Second Variety" by:* Philip K. Dick. *Written by:* Dan O'Bannon, Miguel Tejada-Flores. *Produced by:* Tom Berry, Franco Battista. *Directed by:* Christian Duguay. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 108 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 2078 A.D., on the war-torn planet of Sirius 6B, a new threat emerges against the backdrop of human conflict. Human-built "autonomous swords" called Screamers have begun evolving and operating according to their own agenda. Commander Hendrickson (Weller) treks to the encampment of the enemy to discuss an armistice, and along the way encounters several new types of the Screamers, ones that perfectly mimic human shape and behavior.

COMMENTARY: At the end of 2003, Ron Moore and the Sci Fi Channel presented a re-imagination of the once-popular 1970s space extravaganza, *Battlestar Galactica* (1978–1979). The original series involved alien robots, Cylons, who destroyed most of the human race in a distant galaxy during a peace treaty negotiation, a Pearl Harbor or Trojan Horse–type ambush.

The 21st century remake, however, altered several aspects of the old outer space series. So many, in fact, that the fans of the original hardly recognized the remake. Perhaps most importantly, Ron Moore's re-boot transformed the once otherworldly Cylon race into the Frankenstein-like creation of the human society on Caprica and other colonies. It also made the once-chrome, humanoid Cylons appear totally and completely human in appearance, meaning that you could not tell them apart from the general article. In the post September 11 age of Al-Qaeda sleeper cells, these new Cylons were the perfect infiltrators.

This very idea of a manmade enemy over-whelming his creator and blending in seamlessly with him, however, was already the creative territory of the 1953 story "Second Variety," by Philip K. Dick, well before Ron Moore's re-imagination came around. Dick described the story's theme in a way that should seem very familiar to fans of Moore's *Galactica* re-do:

My grand theme—who is human and who only appears (masquerading) as human?—emerges most fully. Unless we can individually and collectively be certain of the answer to this question, we face what is, in my view, the most serious problem possible. Without answering it adequately, we cannot even be certain of our own selves. I cannot even know myself, let alone you.⁶⁵

"Second Variety" was adapted as *Screamers*, a feature film in the mid–1990s, not even a decade before the re-boot of *Battlestar Galactica* premiered, actually. The film features some small variations from the details of Dick's story, particularly in setting (location and time period) and in technological nomenclature but is otherwise largely faithful. Though the movie is set in the 21st century, the short story was set in the mid–1950s. And the robotic infiltrators of Dick's literary world were referred to as "claws," not Screamers.

Still, *Screamers* gets right to the heart of Dick's self-described terror: being faced with an enemy who appears to be "us," and therefore not easily detected. In the movie, the Screamers are also called Autonomous Mobile Swords and can appear in three distinctive types or models. The problem is that the human soldiers fighting them are not *entirely aware* of the different types, and besides, the robots are always upgrading and improving themselves.

The terror here is that an infiltrator could already be ensconced among humans in secret, and indeed, this too is the very bread and butter of the remade *Battlestar Galactica* series of the 21st century: the discovery of the hidden model Cylons amidst humans. In the film, there are at least two scenes in which characters the audience believe to be human beings are found out to be otherwise.

Also like Moore's re-invention of the original Glen Larson Cylons, the Screamers in the film boast a sense of self-identity and consciousness. "We can smile. We can cry. We can bleed. We can fuck," one declares.

In other words, they are us and we are them.

And that means that we must treat our creations with mercy, with humanity. In one scene in *Screamers*, a character also refers to the machines as "toasters" and that too is a word choice adopted explicitly by *Battlestar Galactica*.

Even the retro-future production design of the remade TV series *Battlestar Galactica* seems to have elements in common with this film. For instance, in that series, humans don't wear space-age uniforms but rather contemporary clothing, even business suits. And they all work with modern rather than futuristic technology, including phones with cords. **Jessica (**

In *Screamers*, people still smoke cigarettes and play cards. It's a non-futuristic future.

It's a little shocking to go back and watch *Screamers* today, post-*BSG*, and see how completely and totally the Sci-Fi (er, Sy Fy...) TV series co-opted the central tenants both of the film and Dick's short story without any attribution or acknowledgment of the source material, but then again ... it's Hollywood.

In large part, fans missed the boat on this appropriation of Dick's short story because they were so focused on how the series differed from the original *Battlestar Galactica*. In a way, that misdirection may have been the most inventive thing about the Ron Moore show.

Given the film's premise, *Screamers* works very well as a paranoid thriller of the 1990s, one in which there is a conspiracy to subvert

human society at large. One of the movie's most spectacular and creepy visuals involves a large door opening at a human base as hundreds of identical Screamers—all of the same physical, human appearance—emerge. And creepily, they all let out a sort of mechanical squeal or cry.



Jessica (Jessica (Jennifer Rubin) has a secret in *Screamers* (1996).

There are also some wonderful visuals here of a nuked human metropolis in the snow, a kind of literal "nuclear winter." And the film's final revelation, regarding Jennifer Rubin's character, plays remarkably well, like something out of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, another horror involving personal identity.

Screamers is a low-budget, science-fiction horror movie adapted from a great literary source, one that proved to be a wellspring of visual and thematic clues for the makers of a popular and well-known 21st century TV series. It doesn't always live up to its source material,

and some character development in the film is ham-handed.

But still, *Screamers* is a surprisingly strong and undeservedly obscure effort.

Thinner * * .

Cast and Crew

CAST: Robert John Burke (Billy Hallick); Michael Constantine (Lempke); Lucinda Jenney (Heidi Halleck); Kari Wuhrer (Gina Lempke); John Horton (Judge Rossington); Sam Freed (Dr. Mike Houston); Daniel Von Barga (Chief Hartley); Joe Mantegna (Richie Ginelli); Joy Lenz (Linda Halleck).

CREW: Spelling Film Presents a Richard P. Rubinstein Production, a Tom Holland Film. *Casting:* Leonard Finger. *Make-up:* Greg Cannom. *Music:* Daniel Licht. *Film Editor:* Marc Laub. *Production Designer:* Laurence Bennett. *Director of Photography:* Kees Van Oostrum. *Film Editor:* Marc Laub. *Based on a Story by:* Stephen King. *Written by:* Michael McDowell and Tom Holland. *Produced by:* Mitchell Golin and Richard P. Rubinstein. *Directed by:* Tom Holland. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An affable, 300-lb. attorney, Billy Halleck (Burke), runs his car into an old gypsy woman crossing the street while his wife is orally pleasuring him. The police and a local judge whitewash the incident and Billy goes free. At least, that is, until gypsy patriarch Lempke (Constantine) curses him, making Billy's body weight drop at an alarming rate. Over the weeks, Billy hovers near death—a practical skeleton—until he thinks to ask the assistance of a grateful client, a Mafioso named Ginelli (Mantegna).

COMMENTARY: Visually undistinguished and hamstrung by a leaden pace, *Thinner* plays a bit like a run-of-the-mill TV-movie. The climax is unpersuasive, the performances are only serviceable, and the film's most important special effect— *Robert John Burke in a fat suit*—

resembles nothing so much as Martin Short's famous fat man, Jiminy Glick.

Yet despite such failings, this adaptation of the Stephen King (Richard Bachman) novel raises some interesting observations about race relations and class distinctions in 1990s America, as well as the continued dominance of the Good Old Boy's Club. For instance, *Thinner* dramatizes the way in which the privileged, affluent white man is able to game the judicial system to his advantage.

A card-carrying member of the Good Old Boy's Club, lawyer Billy Halleck (Burke) transgresses and commits a crime ... negligent vehicular homicide. But his well-positioned friends, the police chief and the judge respectively, arrange it so that Billy doesn't have to go to jail. Their afternoon golf games won't be interrupted.

As the movie makes the case, justice in America isn't really about the letter of the law; it's about who you know. This is even true in the case of Billy and the mob man, Mantegna's Ginelli. When Halleck can't persuade old Lempke to remove his wasting curse, Billy calls in another favor, from the Mafioso. So Halleck is really wired-in, *he's connected*; he boasts the resources with which to fight back even against the super-natural. And that simply isn't the case for many underprivileged minorities and ethnic groups.

No matter how you cut it, the injustice of Billy's reduced sentence contrasts mightily with the manner in which the same Good Old Boy's Club treats outsiders. "We've been invaded by thieving gypsies," sneers the local judge between golf games. Appropriately, Lempke turns him into a lizard.

The gypsies understand there's been a moral transgression too, a rigging of the system, and that's why Lempke resorts to his only brand of payback against Billy Halleck, the man who killed one of his family members. Lempke can't get a fair shake in modern America and knows it. "You never see us," the old man laments. He knows he is invisible and unimportant to the powerful.

Although initially harmless-seeming, Halleck's ever-worsening condition brings out the worst in him. He never gazes into the mirror and takes an accounting of his own sins. Instead, he places all of the blame for woes on his apparently-loving wife, Heidi. She was the one, you will recall, giving him a blow job when he struck the gypsy woman with his car. Now, it seems to me that his wife was doing something ... nice for Billy, and that if he didn't want the sexual attention, well, he should have politely demurred when his spouse made the overture.

But to blame his wife because he was ejaculating at the same

time he killed a gypsy is ungrateful at best, and it keeps Halleck from assessing his own role in the injustice. His wife is a convenient vessel for his anger.

Thinner's screenplay does suggest that Halleck's wife is engaged in an affair with his doctor, and in the film's nihilistic conclusion, Halleck feeds the "curse" back to his wife and the offending physician in the form of a poisoned pie. But really, throughout the film, his wife seems rather believable in her love for Halleck. Even if she transgressed morally, who is Halleck—a beneficiary of insider justice—to throw the first stone (or slice of pie, in this case)?

Perhaps the point is this: the angry white man of the mid-1990s (the Limbaughs, the Gingrichs, the Oliver Norths, etc.) really doesn't have very much to validly be angry about, except the possibility of losing dominance in the American culture at some nebulous future date.

Accordingly, the overall point of *Thinner* indeed seems to be that America is a mean country that favors the rich, the powerful and the violent, and that the only way to get "justice" is to be brutal about it, to bully and intimidate your enemy into submission. Ultimately, Halleck shows no mercy to his wife, his doctor, or Lempke's family. Yet he is the first one to whine and beg for mercy.



Billy Halleck (Robert *Thinner* (1996), adapted Billy Halleck (Robert John Burke) battles his weight and a gypsy curse in *Thinner* (1996), adapted from the Stephen King novel.

Thinner seems to recognize this hypocrisy in Halleck. In the end, he pays a hefty price: his beloved daughter eats the pie ... and will suffer the curse. Here, the movie seems to warn audiences that the next generation will be the unlucky beneficiary, that the sins of the father will be passed on to the child, if we're not very, very careful in the way we dispense "equal justice."

The American Dream has always been about carving out a bigger piece of the pie, but not this pie. Not this pie.

Thinner is observant in social context but still, somehow, lightweight and less-than-filling. Tom Holland is such a good director, it's strange that this film is so undistinguished, so run-of-the-mill, especially with all the good ideas baking underneath the surface.

***Tremors 2: Aftershocks* * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Fred Ward (Earl Bassett); Christopher Garton (Grady); Helen Shaver (Kate White); Marcelo Tubert (Senor Ortega); Michael Gross (Burt Gummer); Marco Hernandez (Julio); Jose Rosario (Pedro. Thomas Rosales (Oil Worker).

CREW: MCA Home Entertainment Presents a Stampede Entertainment Production. *Casting:* Meryl O'Loughlin. *Music:* Jay Ferguson. *Creature Effects Designed and Created by:* Alec Gillis and Tom Woodruff, Jr. *CGI Creatures Created by:* Tippett Studio. *Film Editor:* Bob Ducsay. *Production Designer:* Ivo Cristante. *Director of Photography:* Virgil Harper. *Executive Producers:* Bent Maddock, Ron Underwood. *Written by:* Brent Maddock, S.S. Wilson. *Produced by:* Nancy Roberts, Christopher De Faria. *Directed by:* S.S. Wilson. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Washed-up Perfection hero Earl Bassett (Ward) is offered fifty thousand dollars to clear the Mexican Petromaya Oil Field of subterranean graboids like the ones he once vanquished with his buddy Valentine. He teams with a taxi driver, Grady (Garton), and a sexy geologist, Kate (Shaver), to do the job. But when a new, two-

legged evolution of the graboid appears, the team needs the help of survivalist and gun-lover, Burt Gummer (Gross), recently estranged from his wife.

COMMENTARY: This sequel to 1990's *Tremors* really makes you miss Kevin Bacon. The direct-to-video *Tremors 2: Aftershocks* is frequently likeable, occasionally jaunty, and ultimately a little dopier than it is charming, which was not the case on the first visit to the town of Perfection.

The big problem is that incompetence in the face of deadly monsters is charming and even realistic the first time a character encounters them. *Tremors* proved so enjoyable because it depicted "average joe" characters kind of embracing the scientific method—*trial and error*— to beat the graboids.

But this is the second encounter with the monsters and incompetence, cowardice and silliness—even if humorous—don't sit so well. To put it another way, *Tremors* appeared effortlessly funny. By contrast, the sequel works overtime to seem funny. The characters here aren't quirky. They're dimwitted, and that's a distinction with a difference, to misquote Al Gore.

At times, this sequel feels pretty anti-climactic too, like it's going through the motions. In the first half of the film, the graboid hunts are reduced to montage format, a series of shots of the worms blowing up. This would be roughly equivalent to seeing Chief Brody kill several great white sharks in the first half of *Jaws 2* (1978). It undercuts the action of the first film, as well as the graboid menace.

The newly evolved graboids, called "Shriekers," are actually depicted pretty well with CGI, but I don't care much for the cartoony design. They seem created for, again, the purpose of humor, rather than a natural progression or development of a viable life-form. In fact, the monsters look a little like mobile versions of Audrey from *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986).

Tremors 2 is oddly suspenseless and lacking vitality, even though it features familiar characters we like; even though audiences who liked *Tremors* will want to like this film too. It's good to see Fred Ward and Michael Gross in their familiar roles, and Helen Shaver and Christopher Garton more than get into the spirit of things.

But even the subtitle of this franchise entry indicates the movie's failings. An "aftershock" is defined as a follow-up earthquake of lesser

magnitude than an earlier one. In other words, the second quake is not the main event; it's *a smaller thing* following the main event.

That's a perfect analogy for *Tremors 2: After -shocks*. It's a lesser picture following in the foot-steps of *Tremors*. The original was a 9.5 on the Richter Scale. *Tremors 2* is maybe a 4 or 5.

1997

January 20:

President Clinton is inaugurated for a second term.

January 22:

Madeleine Albright becomes the first female Secretary of State in United States history.

February 13:

The Dow Jones Industrial Average closes above 7000 for the first time in history.

March 4:

Federal funding is barred for human cloning in the U.S.

March 19:

The first movie titles on DVD are released.

March 26:

Following the Comet Hale-Bopp's close approach to Earth on March 22, thirtynine members of the cult called Heaven's Gate commit suicide.

May 11:

IBM supercomputer Deep Blue defeats chess champion Garry

Kasparov in a closely-watched rematch.

June 2:

Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh is convicted on fifteen criminal counts, including conspiracy and murder. On July 13th, he is sentenced to death. The sentence was carried out on June 11, 2001.

June 6:

Melissa Drexler, a New Jersey high school senior, kills her newborn baby in a toilet on the way to the prom.

June 13:

Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh is sentenced to death for the crime.

June 30:

The first Harry Potter book by JK. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, is published.

July 23:

Spree-killer Andrew Cunanan, the murderer of Andrew Versace, commits suicide.

August 31:

Princess Diana is killed in a car accident in a tunnel in Paris while pursued by the paparazzi. Her funeral on September 6th is viewed by more than two billion people globally.

October 27:

The Stock Market crashes. The Dow Jones plummets 500 points, or seven percent.

December 19:

James Cameron's latest movie, Titanic, premieres. It soon becomes the highestgrossing film of all time.

***Alien Resurrection* * * 1/2**

Critical Reception

" *Alien Resurrection's* mix of twisted brilliance and drearily predictable sequel contrivances probably won't make it a box-office juggernaut. But it should please more fans than *Alien*³ did, even though it owes more to that gloomy mood-piece than it does either the first film—a lean, mean monster-movie-machine, or the rousingly bloodthirsty *Aliens*."— Maitland McDonagh, *Film Journal International* [http: //filmjournal.com/filmjournal/search/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id = 10 00698494](http://filmjournal.com/filmjournal/search/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=10_00698494)

"Grotesque and captivating, *Alien Resurrection* is the best of the *Alien* series, which makes it hands-down one of the best sci-fi films of recent years. The imagination and strong visual sense that served the three earlier *Alien* films so well is back, and better, while previous shortcomings have been sorted out. This time there's no confusing nausea with excitement, no pre-occupation with big, clunky machinery, and no dead kids."—"The Best of *Aliens*," *Southland Times*, January 9, 1998, page 12

"As movie spawns go, *Alien Resurrection* is a clumsy,

plodding child having a big hissy fit. The cluttered, surreal, claustrophobic sets and gooey alien creatures look intriguing, sometimes shocking. But the story tries so hard to be imaginative that it congeals and sinks like lead. This film should be an amazing thrill ride, but it has the emotional impact of a bowling ball at rest."—Peter Stack, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, "Alien All Guts No Glory," November 26, 1997

"It's a polished, well-financed, slick-looking piece of ultimately drab cinema with little to offer other than the unrealistic return of Ripley with some memories intact. Much as *Alien*³ negated much of the preceding film's sense of hope, this film negated what remained of the series' integrity. If nothing more, this film gave the under-appreciated *Alien*³ a nudge up to 'not worst in the series.' Seeing aliens swim was fun. The film itself was not."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"Upon leaving the theater after seeing this, my friends and I literally felt as if we had been mugged of our ticket money. This is a sad, sad bastardization of a once-great franchise, with only the always-great Sigourney Weaver providing any sort of gravitas whatsoever. With Dan 'Nick Tortelli' Hedaya playing it for laughs, plus that ridiculous Alien/human hybrid rearing its extremely ugly head, there is no way to judge this movie other than as a resounding failure."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Sigourney Weaver (Ripley); Winona Ryder (Call); Ron Perlman (Johner); Dominique Pinon (Vriess); Dan Hedaya (General Martin Perez); Brad Dourif (Dr. Gediman); Raymond Cruz (DiStephano); Kim Flowers (Hillard); Gary Dourdon (Christie); Leland Orser (Larry Purvis); Michael Wincott (Frank Elgyn); J.E. Freeman (Dr. Wren); Marlen Bush (Scientist); David St. James (Surgeon); Carolyn Campbell (Anesthesiologist); Steve Gilborn (voice of "Father"); Nicole Fellowes (Young Ripley).

CREW: 20th Century–Fox Presents a Brandywine Production. *Casting:* Rick Pagano. *Music:* John Frizzell. *Costume Designer:* Bob Ringwood. *Alien Designed and Created by:* Alec Gillis and Tom Woodruff, Jr. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* Pilof. *Film Editor:* Herve Schneid. *Production Designer:* Nigel Phelps. *Director of Photography:* Darius Khondji. *Co-Producer:* Sigourney Weaver. *Based on characters created by:* Dan O'Bannon, Ronald Shusett. *Executive Producers:* Gordon Carroll, David Giler, Walter Hill. *Produced by:* Bill Badalato. *Written by:*

Joss Whedon. *Directed by:* Jean-Pierre Jeunet. *MPAA Rating:* R.
Running time: 109 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two hundred years after Ellen Ripley's death on Fury 161, the U.S. military successfully clones her after eight attempts, as well as the dangerous queen alien she was carrying inside her. A group of mercenaries from the *Betty* board the military vessel the *Auriga* with contraband — human fodder for the face-huggers created by the newly-born queen. While a fully grown Ripley (Weaver) contends with human emotions and a part-alien nature, one of the mercenaries, an android named Call (Ryder), tells her of her past. Before long, the aliens break loose aboard the *Auriga* and Ripley, Call and the other survivors make for the *Betty* to escape. Before they make Earth orbit, however, Ripley must face the alien queen's new child, the frighteningly human "Newborn."

COMMENTARY: Following the dark, hopeless (but gorgeous and artistic) *Alien*³ (1992), the follow-up franchise entry takes absolutely zero chances in reasserting the property as an overtly commercial one. Sigourney Weaver's Ripley returns alive and well (a clone), with a full head of hair, playing basketball, quipping her way past an army of aliens, and vetting a variety of elaborate action scenes.

Alien Resurrection also boasts a hot young star in its cast (Winona Ryder), evidences some 1990s post-modern humor and wallows in CGI alien hordes. It's a crushing creative disappointment, a total capitulation to the mindless blockbuster mentality of the mid-1990s, and consequently the franchise's most unsatisfactory entry. All subtlety, all humanity has been surgically removed from the movie in an attempt to make *Alien Resurrection* the most crowd-pleasing BMF you've ever seen.

Since 1979, the *Alien* films have always put a serious mood and an amazing sense of place, of location, first. From the space truckers smoking and eating Chinese food aboard the lived-in *Nostromo* in Ridley Scott's original, to the Colonial Marine environs of James Cameron's *Aliens*, even to the ruined, industrial blight of Fury 161 in David Fincher's film, reality and atmosphere have been handled with grace. These settings, plus situational-appropriate characters, grounded the series so thoroughly in recognizable human terms that the acid-blooded, saliva-spewing aliens seemed not only real, but ultra-menacing.

Alien Resurrection makes the characters and world of the aliens a

live-action cartoon. The frightful strength and power of the aliens has been made a laughing stock, particularly during the horrendous sequence wherein the monster's signature jaw pulps the head of General Perez (a grievously miscast Dan Hedaya).

Instead of dying instantly from this vicious attack, *Alien Resurrection* has Hedaya just stand there, alien behind him, looking dazed. He reaches to the back of his skull, picks out a piece of his brain, and looks at it quizzically while the alien waits to strike again. The scene is so poorly acted, so poorly presented that you can't tell if it's supposed to be funny or horrific. Finally, it's just a mess.

Another scene tries so desperately to be manic that it scales the heights of ridiculousness. A character named Larry Purvis (Leland Orser) is carrying a chest-buster inside of him. During his last moments of life, he assaults an evil scientist, Dr. Wren (J.E. Freeman), and manages to position his opponent at just the right place, in just the right moment, so that the emerging chest burster breaks not just through his own ruptured chest, but—conveniently—through Wren's skull too. It's a ludicrous, over-the-top moment meant to be intense but in concept and execution, like the Hedaya scene proves dumb, dumb, dumb.

Alien Resurrection represents the total stupidification of a once-great franchise, despite the fact that Joss Whedon wrote the script and the fact that the diverse, morally shady crew of the *Betty* plays as an early version of the *Serenity* crew from the TV show *Firefly*.



A cloned Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) embraces her sensual, alien side in *Alien Resurrection* (1997).

Whedon once noted that it wasn't that his script was altered that made *Alien Resurrection* so poor, it was every decision that came after the script: the casting, the costumes, even the creature design. You can see his point. Winona Ryder is underwhelming as Call, and Hedaya never manages to be convincing as a general (his salute to a dead soldier is played as mocking and unserious). In terms of costumes, *Alien Resurrection* dresses its evil scientist in—wait for it—futuristic white coats, just so the audience understands that, you know, they are scientists.

On the last front, while it's fascinating to see the Alien queen to undergo a live human-style birth with an engorged womb and all, the Newborn monstrosity that emerges is a thing of no elegance and no beauty. And again, that fact feels like a betrayal or at least misunderstanding of the franchise's legacy. The alien is a perfect organism, the early films made clear. It is perfect and perfectly malicious in intent and shape. The Newborn lacks grace and any capacity whatsoever to scare. It looks like a skinny, albino E.T. with a pot belly and spaghetti arms.

Sigourney Weaver returns to play Ripley but is now given nothing to do other than spout one liners. This is a character who lost all of her friends and co-workers, who embraced motherhood, and

who finally decided, bravely, to sacrifice her life rather than let the aliens fall into the Company's hands. This film not only undercuts that last moral victory, it reduces her to a cartoon cutout. This Ripley can shoot a mean basket but has no human depth anymore. In the past, Sigourney Weaver rigorously fought to maintain Ripley's integrity, and this new depiction of her as a wise-cracking superhero, while momentarily fun, also undercuts the franchise's heritage.

Alien Resurrection's big set piece involves the survivors aboard the *Auriga* swimming through a flooded compartment of the ship to safety. It's a long swim too, and the scene culminates with swimming aliens on the attack. Yep, that's the movie's big revelation about these monsters: they can swim. In fairness, the scene is tense and well-shot, as characters struggle to hold their breaths and swim for their lives while the adaptable aliens, the equivalent of great white sharks, circle in for the kill.

Although the science run amok angle of *Alien Resurrection* involves a big issue of 1997, cloning, it was viewed by many reviewers as a product of the ongoing culture wars of the latter-half of the decade that Pat Buchanan had warned of in his fiery 1992 convention appearance. In particular, the film was viewed by many right wing critics as a commentary and endorsement of abortion. Rob Nelson wrote: **Ripley (Sigourney capabilities to the**

Like *Alien3*, *Resurrection* doubles as a right-to-choose tract, with Ripley debating whether to expel something nasty that she created without meaning.... Complicating matters further, Ripley, as "the monster's mother" (and part monster herself), can't help identifying with the queen. Their bond is symbiotic: The queen gives Ripley her new talent for basketball and overall bad self (no small virtue in the presence of men); and Ripley returns to the queen her ability to breed, which becomes the alien Mildred Pierce's *raison d'être* and mortal flaw.⁶⁶

James Bowman, a writer for the right-wing *National Review* agreed, calling the death of the film's alien Newborn "as close to a depiction of abortion as you're ever likely to see on the silver screen" and the ending of "an inconvenient life." He went on to conclude:

... new myths are now being manufactured by Hollywood featuring the imagery of heroic feminism and designed to justify abortion as that form of violence made necessary by our hedonistic and unisex "lifestyle." An obvious example of this mythmaking is to be found in the *Alien* series of films, whose most recent installment, *Alien Resurrection*, manages more strikingly than any of its predecessors to render an innocence at least as

complete as that of the Noble Savage in the tones and tints of a terrible savagery.⁶⁷



Ripley (Sigourney Weaver, left) demonstrates her alien-infused healing capabilities to the android Call (Winona Ryder) in *Alien Resurrection*.

Alien Resurrection depicts a government authority (the military) that usurps the right of individuals (remember the hijacked individuals), and then makes them carry to term, without their permission and against their wills, the life-forms inside their bodies. Does that plot make it a pro-choice tract?

Perhaps, but one ought to remember too that these "babies" are murdering, acid-for-blood aliens too, and terminating aliens isn't the same matter as terminating unborn babies. But certainly this reading of the film reveals that Pat Buchanan's 1992 convention prediction of a culture war in the 1990s had come to pass. By the second Clinton administration, it was at a fever pitch, and even mainstream blockbusters were being viewed as carriers of liberal agenda.

But what *Alien Resurrection* actually involves, it seems, in regards to the aliens and the Ripley clone herself is the intrusion of authority

into a realm where it doesn't belong: the creation of life itself without regards to the quality of that life. It's a "don't tamper in God's domain" libertarian tract more than it's a *Roe v. Wade*—supporting abortion-rights epic.

The movie urges restraint on the part of scientists who would make monsters out of our DNA. When Ripley destroys her deformed clones with a flamethrower, it may not be an abortion, but it certainly is a mercy killing. One clone begs "kill me." So perhaps the movie is more about euthanasia and the right to die than it is about abortion, another hot-button issue thanks to the acts of Dr. Jack Kevorkian, or "Dr. Death." The analysis of the right-wing critics above seems to want to blame Ripley for something terrible, which is weird. What is her "evil" lifestyle that renders her culpable here?

This is one case where I wish the movie had actually lived up, more fully, to some of the implications that critics read into it. The bottom line is that *Alien Resurrection* is a colorful cartoon, *Alien Lite*.

***Amityville Dollhouse* * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Robin Thomas (Bill Martin); Star Andreef (Claire Martin); Clayton Murray (Jimmy's Dad); Lenore Kasdorf (Aunt Marla); Allen Cutler (Todd Martin); Franc Ross (Tobias); Lisa Robin Kelly (Dana); Jarrett Lennon (Jimmy Martin); Rachel Duncan (Jessica Martin).

CREW: Spectator Films in association with Zeta Entertainment present a Steve White film. *CASTING:* Laura Schiff. *Co-Producer:* Jennifer Robinson. *Costume Designer:* Nanette Acosta. *Production Designer:* Jerry Fleming. *Music:* Ray Colcord. *Film Editor:* Kert Vander Meulen. *Director of Photography:* Tom Callaway. *Executive Producer:* David Newlon. *Produced by:* Zane W. Levitt, Mark Yellen, Steve White. *Written by:* Joshua Michael Stern. *Directed by:* Steve White. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A blended American family moves in together for the first time and is bedeviled by a toy dollhouse originating from the legendary haunted house in Amityville. The dollhouse makes little Jessica (Duncan) sick, generates unwanted sexual urges in new mom Claire (Andreef) for her adopted teen son, Todd (Cutler), and generally threatens to tear asunder the vulnerable family.

COMMENTARY: At one point during *Amityville Dollhouse*, patriarch Bill Martin (Thomas) is depicted reading a self-help book entitled *Your Blended Family*. In many significant ways, this "new" kind of family unit is at the crux of the film's horror scenario.

Specifically, the haunted house artifact *du jour*, a dollhouse, strikes at the blended Martin family by going for the weak, soft center, by trying to tear the new family asunder with distrust and shame. This is actually a very common 1990s horror scenario because of the increase in blended families forged during the decade. Similar plots are also depicted in the alien-invasion film *Body Snatchers* (1994) and the interloper film *Mother's Boys* (1994).

In 1990, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, some thirty-million American children under the age of thirteen were living with one step-parent or non-biological parent. Furthermore, the Bureau estimated that by the end of the decade, more families in America would be blended ones rather than so-called "original" ones. This was a huge shift in demographics, reflective of the national divorce rates and the general instability of the family unit in America.

Looking objectively at the make-up of a potential blended family, some of the obstacles are plain. A child who acquires a "stepfather" still has his biological father in another family to reckon with, and must deal with two authoritarian male figures in his life. There may even be an aggressive response to the new family by the original father, and indeed that's just one conflict explored by *Amityville Dollhouse*.

Specifically, Bill Martin tries to accommodate a "new" son, Jim (Lennon), into his life, but unknowingly, the boy is being visited by his dead, ghoulish father (a manifestation of the dollhouse), a specter who urges him to destroy his "new" family unit.

Similarly, many blended families feature an adult woman and a young adult son not biologically-related to her. The teenage son may find himself attracted to his new mom, and without the taboo of incest involved, attempt to act on such impulses. The opposite is also true; that a "mom" may be sexually-attracted to a young nonbiological son.

Here, Mom Claire seems pretty disturbed when she begins acting in a sexually aggressive and jealous fashion towards Todd, her new stepson who is of a sexually-active age. We all realize—from *The Jerry Springer Show*—that family members living under one roof in this environment occasionally do act in an inappropriate fashion that harms the "unit."

That's just human nature, but *Amityville Dollhouse* suggests a different cause: *the supernatural*. What it doesn't postulate, however, is a motive for the dollhouse's application of evil.

Occasionally here, director White stages a good and memorable shot. There's one visually-interesting scene set around a populated kitchen table (the hearth of the new family unit in America). Dad serves pancakes to his wards and the camera spins to each member of the troubled family as he or she departs the table in anger, or upset. The idea is that the family is indeed spinning out of control, splintered, and we see that notion visually expressed in one moving, impressive composition.

One just wishes that the rest of the movie could live up to the staging of that scene. Overall,

Amityville Dollhouse features lame quips from its agents of evil ("Don't worry ... it only hurts forever"), a repetitive plot, and it is never scary.

And once again, the idea of an amorphous "Evil" as embodied by the dollhouse is inadequate. What are the limits of the dollhouse's powers? What does it gain by destroying the Martins? Why does it pursue its nebulous goals in this particular fashion, by exploiting a blended family? And even, why the heck a dollhouse? What does the dollhouse represent in this setting? The new house of the Martins? A new hope for the family?

Amityville Dollhouse doesn't seem certain itself, and consequently its final quip is way off the mark. "Next time, let's just rent" says one character, in closing. But what does that remark have to do with anything? The Martins' house was not the source of the evil, the dollhouse was. And the evil wrought by the dollhouse didn't have anything to do with home ownership (as was the case in the first *Amityville Horror* film in 1979).

No, here the evil manipulated the family members, playing on the interpersonal weaknesses and failings of the blended family. *Amityville Dollhouse's* last line doesn't acknowledge that truth.

Is it possible that the makers of this movie didn't understand what their narrative was really about?

***An American Werewolf in Paris* * ***

" *Werewolf* is about as infantile as a movie can be, but it's almost hard to criticize a movie that's so unambitious; it sets out to do nothing, and it succeeds."—Sam Adams, "Movie Shorts: *An American Werewolf in Paris*," *Philadelphia City Paper*, January 1–8, 1998, <http://citypaper.net/articles/010198/movsht3.shtml>

"The computer-generated werewolves look painfully unreal. The creatures would probably have been more believable had they been men in wolf suits. Repeated use is made of the 'werewolf cam,' an infrared wolf's point-of-view approach that's interesting the first couple of times it's employed, then becomes tedious."—James Berardinelli, *Reel Views*, 1997, http://www.reelviews.net/movies/a/american_werewolf.html

"... little more than an inept copy of the original, minus the thematic insight.... [B]ut the film's failure to frighten is not due to technical flaws, but to an almost complete lack of dramatic interest."—Patricia Moir, "Good Dog, Bad Dog," *Cinefantastique* Volume 29, Number 12, April 1998, page 59

Cast and Crew

CAST: Tom Everett Scott (Andy McDermott); Julie Delpy (Sarafine); Vince Vieluf (Brad); Phil Buckman (Chris); Julie Bowen (Amy); Pierre Cosso (Claude); Tom Novembre (Inspector Ledeu); Maria Machado (Chief Bonnet); Salem Bouabdallah (Detective Ben Bou).

CREW: Hollywood Pictures presents, in association with J&M Entertainment and Cornerstone Pictures, a Richard Clais Production, an Anthony Waller film. *Music:* Wilbert Hirsch. *Film Editor:* Matthias Kammemaer. *Director of Photography:* Egon Werdin. *Co-Producer:* Alexander Buchman. *Executive Producer:* Anthony Waller. Based on characters created by John Landis in *An American Werewolf in London*. *Produced by:* Richard Claus. *Directed by:* Anthony Waller. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On a daredevil tour of Europe with two friends, a young American man, Andy (Everett Scott), bungee jumps off the Eiffel Tower to save the life of a suicidal French beauty, Sarafine (Delpy). Later, Andy grows infatuated and obsessed with Sarafine and tracks her down, only to learn that she is a werewolf. Worse, she is involved with a cult of werewolves who hope to dominate the human race and purify the world. After Andy is bitten, he uses his newfound

lycanthropic abilities to stop the cult and save Sarafine.

COMMENTARY: *An American Werewolf in London* (1981) remains a genre classic for several good reasons (see: *Innocent Blood*). In short, the film's Rick Baker-sponsored special effects were ground-breaking at the time and still convince the eye some quarter-century after the film's debut. More importantly, the film's central romance between an American and his British nurse still feels appropriately tragic ... and touching.

On top of all those substantial qualities, Landis made his Wolf Man movie wickedly funny. Through a "moon"-themed pop-music score and other ironic touches, Landis lovingly updated all the old werewolf clichés for the 1980s.



Behind the scenes: *An American Werewolf in Paris* director Anthony Waller (center) explains a scene to Tom Everett Scott (left) and Julie Delpy.

American Werewolf in Paris just isn't in the same league. It's not a work of art with the vision of one talented man driving it, but a shallow, silly romp. If that sounds bad, it's even worse than I make it sound. *An American Werewolf in Paris* is a hyper-edited mess with no sense of tragedy, comedy, horror or even humanity. Scenes begin and end with no rhyme or reason, the computer generated special effects

are almost a complete bust, and there are vast gaps in situational logic in the narrative, which, over due course, explode like landmines.

On the latter front, for instance, lanky Andy — a brand new werewolf — manages to beat the more-experienced lycanthrope, Claude, in a fistfight during the climax. In fact, the hulking Claude is the senior werewolf who first turned Andy into a beast. He's the leader of a cult of werewolves too ... so he's tough. The film should have found some clever way for Andy to beat someone with greater strength and more experience rather than with simple brawn, but it doesn't. Rather, we're simply supposed to accept that Andy can beat Claude in a fair fight.

Well, Andy *is* American, and those French are wimps, right?

And do we really need the scene in which Andy runs around Paris in his underwear, chased by one fake-looking werewolf or another, causing traffic accidents and angering motorists, all to the tune of upbeat pop music? Or the one where he chews a condom, pretending that it is bubble gum? *An American Werewolf in London* was self-reflexive and knowing; the sequel's sense of humor is just low-brow.

Adding insult to injury, *An American Werewolf in Paris* is aggressively filmed and edited, rife with irritating "comic" montages, and it plays entirely to the short-attention-span crowd. The downside of this approach is that you don't always know where you are, who you are with, or why you are with them. First we're in a laboratory discussing the werewolf disease, then we're in an impromptu sex scene, then we're in a chase, and then we're back in the lab discussing werewolves again.

Whoever assembled this thing should be on Ritalin.

One positive thing you can say about this caffeinated approach to filmmaking is that it occasionally becomes so manic that it entertains simply on the basis of incessant sensory overstimulation. The movie speeds by so wackily you don't always ask the questions you should. *Like, hey, did they just invent a serum to cure lycanthropy? Or is that ghost supposed to be Jenny Agutter?*

Yet by the end of the film, you tire of the drumbeat. You feel like you have whiplash ... or motion sickness. It's clear the film's makers have compensated for their story deficits with flashy, overwrought visuals, even if they have done so with a surfeit of so-called "style."

In terms of characterization and narrative, one admittedly fun twist in the film arrives in the form of Julie Bowen's Amy, a so-called "bimbo" Andy kills during one of his nightly transformations. She

returns as a sarcastic, undead spirit — the proverbial shrew. She constantly nags him and rattles off derogatory remarks like "thanks for the lovely evening, douche bag." And even dead, she seems the only character with any life.

It's one thing to be visited by a dead friend (like Griffin Dunne in *An American Werewolf in London*), it's quite another to be saddled with an unctuous, obnoxious pain-in-the-ass, an almost-one-night stand who hates your guts.

The youthful leads, the incessant pop music, the aggressive-editing, the up-to-the-minute fads (bungee jumping) and the focus on less-than-stellar computer effects all tag *An American Werewolf in Paris* as a horror film of the latter-1990s trend. It's all youthful flash and little substance.

Anaconda * * *

Critical Reception

"Scary, this movie isn't. The faux serpent, albeit an impressive creature, looks wholly unrealistic as it zips through water and air like a Saturday morning cartoon character.... As cheesy, predictable horror flicks go, *Anaconda* squeezes considerable life from its aspirations."—Ian Hodder, *Box Office Magazine*, "Anaconda." April 10, 1997

"No single movie in the annals of cheesy aquatic flicks fashioned after *Jaws*— we're talking *Orca*, *Killer Fish*, *Tentacles* and *Jaws 2*, *3* and *4*— has ever provided more unintentional laughs than *Anaconda*."— Edward Marguiles, *Movieline*, "Anaconda," <http://movieline.standard8media.com/reviews/anaconda.shtml>

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jennifer Lopez (Terri Flores); Ice Cube (Danny Rich); Jon Voight (Paul Serone); Eric Stoltz (Professor Steven Cale); Jonathan Hyde (Warren Westridge); Owen Wilson (Gary Dixon); Kari Wuhrer (Denise Kalberg); Vincent Castellanos (Mateo); Danny Trejo (Poacher).

CREW: Columbia Pictures Presents a CL Cinema Line Films Corporation Production, a Film by Luis Llosa. *Casting:* Mindy Marin. *Animatronic Effects:* Walt Conti. *Visual Effects:* John Nelson. *Music:*

Randy Edelman. *Film Editor*: Michael R. Miller. *Production Designer*: Kirk M. Petruccelli. *Director of Photography*: Bill Butler. *Executive Producer*: Susan Ruskin. *Produced by*: Verna Harrah, Leonard Rubinowitz, Carole Little. *Written by*: Hans Bauer, Jim Cash, Jack Epps, Jr. *Directed by*: Luis Llosa. *MPAA Rating*: PG-13. *Running time*: 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A documentary film crew embarks on a journey down the Amazon River in search of the missing tribe "The People of the Mist." On their voyage, they rescue a mad snake hunter, Serone (Voight), who directs the ship on a so-called "short cut" through the waters of a giant carnivorous snake after the team leader, Professor Cale (Stoltz), is injured. In a lonely isolated tributary, the crew led by Terri (Lopez) battles the fierce anaconda.

COMMENTARY: Nobody is going to mistake *Anaconda* for a classic of the genre, and the CGI special effects depictions of the titular giant snake are occasionally downright terrible. Still, in the new age of digital monster movies, the film remains effective in large part due to the great B-movie performance of John Voight as the real snake in the grass, Paul Serone. The undercurrent of *Anaconda's* story, a man vs. nature tale, also lends the film enough gravitas to hold the attention.

The most efficacious way to discuss *Anaconda*, perhaps, is to reference other films. Set on a remote area of the Amazon River, with a small boat serving as the central location, the 1997 movie largely recalls Jack Arnold's seminal *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954).

The battle between man and nature was quite plain in the Arnold film too, but that horror classic was also dominated by a just-beneath-the-surface aura of repressed sexuality. *Anaconda* really has no such complexity or meaning beyond the battle for survival.

Still, there's much in common here. Both films feature a monster that shouldn't be. Both films focus on the idea that "There are many strange legends in the Amazon," as one character in *Creature from the Black Lagoon* notes. In *Anaconda*, the legend involves a local tribe that has disappeared, "The People of the Mist."

Both monster movies also concern the discovery of something wild and heretofore unseen, and the apparent urgent need of the human race to understand and possess it, much as the men in *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* also seek to possess Kay (Julie Adams), the only woman on the expedition.



Filmmaker Terri Flores (Jennifer Lopez, left) races to the rescue of cameraman Danny (Ice Cube) as a killer snake approaches in *Anaconda* (1997).



Terri (Lopez) hoists herself out of the water in *Anaconda*.

In *Anaconda*, Serone is the latest iteration of the arrogant "white" hunter (with more than a little bit of Robert Shaw's Quint in him for good measure). He wants to blow up a wall that protects one part of the river; he wants to deploy local monkeys as "bait" for the giant snake, and so forth.

The battle between Serone and the film crew on the boat explicitly involves "upsetting the ecological balance of the river," and it's no accident that the People of the Mist see the snake as their holy figure, a God. In this case, the snake punishes the trespassers who have caused the imbalance in the environment.

Anaconda is extremely fortunate to have Jon Voight playing Serone, especially since so many of the protagonists, particularly Stoltz, seem milque-toast. Voight plays the antagonistic character with an impenetrable French accent and extreme arrogance. This smug hunter manipulates and cajoles the crew into following his plan to capture the snake, and Voight steals almost every scene he's in.

His last moment is probably the film's most legendary. After the giant anaconda has swallowed Voight whole (and the movie provides a shot from inside the animal's gullet, as Serone slides by), he is then regurgitated, slimy digestive snake juices and all. In this hideous, partially devoured-state, Serone winks at Jennifer Lopez's Terri, and it's so perfectly played that you can't tell if it's supposed to be a reflex, or just Voight having wicked fun with a larger-than-life villain.

Anaconda employs plenty of snake-cam point of view shots stalking prey, and even one hideous moment during which the camera captures the imprint of a human face on the dorsal side of the swimming snake. Since *Anaconda* has gone to great lengths to explain what it means to be killed by a snake of this type (cracking bones and exploding veins, for instance), that fate seems truly terrifying.

Anaconda is not *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, but with larger-than-life Serone proving as big a menace as the over-sized serpent, *Anaconda* offers two snakes for the price of one. In a pinch, that's a good deal.

LEGACY: A sequel to *Anaconda* followed in April of 2004, entitled *Anacondas: The Hunt for the Blood Orchid*.

Critical Reception

"There's little doubt that *Breakdown* remains one of the most effective and flatout engrossing thrillers within recent cinematic history, as the film—anchored by star Kurt's Russell's engaging performance—boasts a blistering pace that's perpetuated by several absolutely enthralling action sequences."—David Nusair, *Reel Film Reviews*, "The Films of Jonathan Mostow," July 5, 2009, <http://reelfilm.com/mostow.html#break>

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kurt Russell (Jeffrey Taylor); J.T. Walsh (Red Barr); Kathleen Quinlan (Amy); M.C. Gainey (Earl); Jake Noseworthy (Billy); Rex Linn (Sheriff Boyd); Rich Binkley (A.J.); Thomas Kopache (Calhoun); Jack McGee (Short Order Cook); Moira Harris (Arlene); Vincent Berry (Deke).

CREW: Paramount Pictures presents, in association with Dino De Laurentiis and Spelling Films, a Jonathan Mostow film. *Casting:* Carol Lewis. *Music:* Basil Poledouris. *Costume Designer:* Terry Dresbach. *Film Editor:* Derek Brechin, Kevin Stitt. *Production Designer:* Victoria Paul. *Director of Photography:* Doug Milsom. *Executive Producer:* Jonathan Fernandez, Harry Colomby. *Produced by:* Martha and Dino De Laurentiis. *Written by:* Jonathan Mostow and Sam Montgomery. *Story by:* Jonathan Mostow. *Directed by:* Jonathan Mostow. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On a move from Massachusetts to San Diego, the economically troubled husband and wife, Jeff (Russell) and Amy (Quinlan) Tanner, run into trouble on the road. Their jeep breaks down in an isolated stretch of desert. Amy goes off with a friendly trucker (Walsh) to call for a tow, but then vanishes without a trace. Soon, Jeff realizes his jeep was sabotaged and sets off to find his wife, who has been kidnapped and taken to the trucker's distant farm. In fact, Amy will be killed unless Jeff can pay a ransom ... that he doesn't have.

COMMENTARY: In some important ways, Jonathan Mostow's *Breakdown* is a horror film in the spirit of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). It concerns a road-trip gone horribly wrong, as imperiled travelers are forced to contend with hostile locals, locals who boast

their own sense of right and wrong, civilization and savagery.

Unlike the Sawyer family in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* or the Jupiter clan in *The Hills Have Eyes*, however, the villains in *Breakdown* aren't fighting for literal survival (depending on cannibalism) in this film. Instead, they are jockeying for economic superiority. They are "have nots" preying on the "haves," and this facet very much makes *Breakdown* a class warfare, culture warfare film.

The protagonists in *Breakdown*, the Taylors, are what some people would likely term coastal elites. They are moving from one coast (and liberal stronghold) in Massachusetts to another in San Diego. But between these pinnacles of "civilization," they must cross a vast swath of Red America, and particularly the dangerous West. It is a journey they are not equipped to take. Out in the desert, their cell phone doesn't get reception. They don't really know how to fix their SUV, so it works against them too, easily sabotaged by the local scavengers. They even look down their nose at the convenience stores in the middle-of-nowhere, commenting on a "junk food fiesta" and noting that junk food is "probably gourmet cuisine around here."

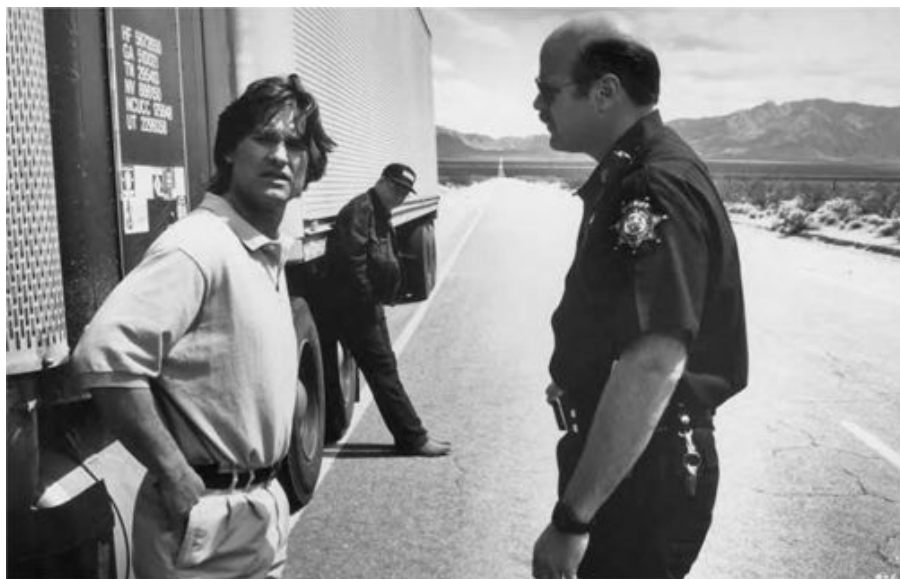
The funny thing about the Taylors is that they are not, in reality, the rich elites that the scavengers assume from their material trappings (their preppy clothes, their expensive SUV, their smug attitudes). On the contrary, the yuppie-ish Taylors have been living beyond their means for some time and are facing an economic apocalypse. That's the reason for their relocation. The scavengers, led by Red Barr (J.T. Walsh), don't realize this; they think they can shake down the rich Taylors, unaware there's nothing left to shake down.

It's no coincidence that *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Hills Have Eyes* and *Breakdown* all are set in the American West. These films gain much of their power from the still-powerful pull of Western mythology in our culture—of a frontier where anything is possible. In those possibilities, fear dwells. This is how the *Breakdown* presskit looked at the film's setting:

Westerns are about the new frontier, settlers going out and venturing from the safety of their East Coast dwellings to the Wild West where there is no law and they have to survive on their own wits. This movie is very much the same kind of movie in that Kurt Russell as Jeff Taylor is the city slicker and he's in strange territory. The question is, is he going to survive.⁶⁸

This "strange territory" where there is "no law" is visually cast in ominous terms in *Breakdown*. When Jeff ends up at a local police station to report the disappearance of his wife, Mostow's camera scans

a wall composed entirely of missing persons flyers. The screenplay then reports that 100,000 people go missing in America every year, right as we're looking at all these faces. Each one has a story. And what *Breakdown* suggests is that predators are loose on these back roads, working in tandem (a conspiracy) to take what the "haves" own.



With the highway stretching to the horizon, Jeff Taylor (Kurt Russell, left) seeks help finding his wife from the local sheriff (Rex Linn). In the background, the villainous Red (J.T. Walsh). From Jonathan Mostow's *Breakdown* (1997).

Later, Jeff looks for a familiar face (his wife, or the trucker who picked her up) at a local diner, and Mostow provides a P.O.V. shot from Jeff's perspective as he gazes out at a sea of unfriendly, guarded faces. Out here, alone, he doesn't know who is his enemy and who is his friend, and the choice of angles, and the nature of the faces glaring at the camera, make it plain. He's alone.

In some sense *Breakdown* might even be viewed as a 1990s interloper film. "Trust no one," as *The X-Files* might remind us at this juncture. Not the friendly trucker of *Breakdown*, the prospective roommate of *Single White Female*, not the office worker of *The Temp*, not the guy with his arm in a cast in *The Vanishing*. Forget Michael and Jason: these wolves in sheep's clothing are the monsters of the 1990s. And *Breakdown's* "wolf," Red Barr, is a real monster, a guy willing to blackmail, steal and murder to acquire more things, to get more wealth. By his frame of mind, he deserves it, and travelers like

Jeff are interlopers in his terrain, just "rich assholes looking for trouble," to quote the movie.



Jeff Taylor (Russell) holds on for dear life on the bottom of a speeding truck, in an action scene from *Breakdown*.



Jonathan Mostow (foreground) preps a scene for the road horror, *Breakdown* (1997).

To some extent what's being charted in *Breakdown* is the porous border between Red State and Blue State America. Jeff is from Boston and wears pleated pants and an Izod shirt. He drives the

aforementioned SUV, though it's unlikely he's ever been "off road" before his misadventures in this film. Red Barr wears a ball cap and jeans, lives in the West and drives a beat-up old pick-up truck. In a superbly-edited final battle, Mostow pits these two very different men against each other in violent fashion. Their eyes meet in mad, extreme close-up, before the death blow finally comes.

The "breakdown" in this film refers not just to the sabotaged SUV then. It may refer, in part, to the polarization between Liberal/Blue States and Conservative/Red States, a total "breakdown" of civility and understanding. In Washington, D.C., in the 1990s, it was open warfare between America's political parties, with conservatives doing everything they could to entrap and bring down President Clinton (who was helping their cause with his bad personal behavior). This divide only grew worse in the 2000s, with the country totally polarized in the contested presidential election between George W. Bush (the ultimate red stater) and Al Gore (the ultimate blue stater).

In some sense, *Breakdown* seems to get at this troubling dynamic. It lands a Blue Stater in a frontier, Red State, at the mercy of a materialistic "have not" and then plays out, in bloody, violent terms, the specifics of that conflict.

In the end, the preppy Northeastern elite wins—in the tradition of *The Hills Have Eyes*— by throwing off some of the shackles of polite civilization and fighting just as dirty as his enemies do.

That's a lesson that many national Democrats still haven't learned very effectively. And they lost the White House in 2000 because of it.

Campfire Tales * * . (DTV)

Cast and Crew

CAST: James Marsden (Eddie); Amy Smart (Jennie); Jay R. Ferguson (Cliff); Christie Taylor (Laura); Christopher Kennedy Masterson (Eric); Kim Murphy (Alex); Ron Livingston (Rick); Jennifer MacDonald (Valerie); Hawthorne James (Cole); Alex McKenna (Amanda); Devon Odessa (Katherine); Jonathan Fuller (The Internet Man); Suzanne Goddard (Mom); Michael Dempsey (Dad); Jacinda Barrett (Heather); Glenn Quinn (Scott); Father (Denny Arnold).

CREW: New Line Cinema Presents a Vault and Kunert/Manes Production. *CASTING:* Nicole Arbusto, Joy Dickson. *MUSIC:* Andrew Rose. *PRODUCTION DESIGNER:* Shay Austin. *FILM EDITOR:* Luis Colina, Steve Nevius,

Richard H. Fields. *Director of Photography*: John Peters. *Executive Producer*: David Cooper. *Produced by*: Eric Manes, Lori Miller, Larry Weinberg. *Screenplay by*: Martin Kunert, Eric Manes, Matt Cooper. *Story by*: Martin Kuner, Eric Manes. *Directed by*: David Semel, Martin Kunert, Matt Cooper. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Four teens escape a car wreck at night and build a campfire in a dilapidated church in the isolated woods. The teens tell each other scary stories to pass the time until rescue arrives. "The Honeymoon" involves newlyweds Rick and Valerie vacationing in their RV when they are hunted by werewolf-like creatures. In "People Can Lick Too," an Internet predator pays an unwanted visit to a young girl, Amanda, whom he met in a chat room. In the final "The Locket," a loner (Quinn) encounters a farmhouse inhabited by a mute girl (Barrett) and the murderous ghost of her father.

COMMENTARY: This is the second 1990s horror anthology entitled *Campfire Tales*, and like the other, unrelated film from 1991, it involves horrific vignettes recounted around a campfire.

Also, like the other *Campfire Tales*, this one probably deserves to be a little less obscure than it is. Filmed at the height of the slasher revival, it features smart, late-1990s teens countenancing several tales of terror, one of which involves them too.

The film opens, just like the other *Campfire Tales*, with yet another variation on the urban legend that sociologist Brunvand called "The Hook." Here, two teens in a car, Eddie and Jenny, encounter terror on lover's lane.

The second tale, "The Honeymoon," is a bit more original. It involves a road-trip-gone-awry tale of newlyweds interfacing with terror in the woods at the claws of unseen, werewolf-like, vicious creatures. With characters stuck out in the woods, out of gas and under siege, this tale is scary. The story ends with another bit of "The Hook" urban legend, particularly the part about a person hanged over a vehicle, his hands scraping repetitively on the hood of the car.

Commendably, "The Honeymoon" is wellacted, and also doesn't over-explain its frightening monsters. We aren't entirely sure what they are, exactly, and that makes them more terrifying. "You're lucky you still got your skin on," one character relates about the monsters, but otherwise, they're a tantalizing mystery.

The next story in *Campfire Tales* is set in modern American

suburbia and involves a particular bugaboo of the nineties. The story is called "People Can Lick Too" and the narrative concerns the Internet. A serial-killing predator hides behind a false identity while instant messaging an underage girl, Jessica, who is left home alone.

Armed with knowledge of the girl's comings and goings, the killer stalks her in her house, and once more, the level of suspense is greater than what you'd expect from a straight-to-video horror anthology of the 1990s. This installment really gets at important issues of the decade: the innocence and gullibility of kids on the Internet, as a whole new way to "stalk" people opens up new terrors.

The final tale, "The Locket," is the kind of traditional wanderer-comes-upon-ghosts-at-a-farmhouse tale you might see on an episode of *Night Gallery* in the early 1970s. It's probably the weakest of the bunch. The story's final kicker, that a girl rescued from her abusive father is actually a ghost, is gleaned almost from the story's first scene. This is the only one of the stories not to be particularly suspenseful and might better have been positioned in the middle of the film, where it wouldn't drag down the film's climax.

The film's final twist at the campfire is straight out of *Carnival of Souls*, but it has an interesting variation: all the actors from the rest of the film appear in the epilogue, in different roles, as though their presence was subconsciously impacting the shape of the stories told.

Campfire Tales is a modest but enjoyable effort. The stories don't try to do too much, and don't rely at all on special effects. The stories are also well-executed, and so passing the time around this campfire is fun.

***The Devil's Advocate* * * * ***

Critical Reception

"The movie is a rare breed—a big-budget film that deals with good and evil, and personal responsibility. If C.S. Lewis (author of *The Screwtape Letters*) wrote screenplays, he could hardly have improved on the script."—Don Feder, *Human Events*, November 21, 1997, page 10

"Slick, artful and thought-provoking, it argues Satan's no saint but perhaps he doesn't deserve the bad rap he's had, either. After all, he only leads us into temptation—free will determines which route we take. Nothing new there but rarely has it been

illustrated with such wit and imagination. *The Devil's Advocate* is also a morality tale that beautifully puts the boot into lawyers."—Phil Wakefield, *The Dominion Post*, "Devil of a Good Film," January 1, 1998, page 16

" *The Devil's Advocate* provides an interesting combination of aspects of courtroom drama with demonological and apocalyptic dark fantasy. Al Pacino plays the owner of a major law firm and Keanu Reeves is his young, aggressive protégé. Reeves' character comes to realize at the climax of the film that his boss is in fact Satan who seeks his help in bringing the antichrist into the world. Reeves resists given his guilt and conservative Christian upbringing. This leads to an impassioned speech by Pacino who questions whether God as conceived of in the Judeo-Christian tradition is worthy of worship, and then suggests that it is Satan who is the true advocate of humanity with all its imperfections. Pacino's speech raises serious theological and metaphysical questions related to theodicy, the attempt to justify God's goodness in the face of evil. Horror might be the last places many people would think of as sources for significant metaphysical reflection, but if we are willing to look more closely the material is there to challenge us. *The Devil's Advocate* provides us with one such worthy theological morsel."—John W. Morehead, *TheoFantastique*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Keanu Reeves (Kevin Lomax); Al Pacino (John Milton); Charlize Theron (Mary Ann); Connie Nielson (Christabella); Jeffrey Jones (Eddie Barzoon); Craig T. Nelson (Alex Cullen); Judith Ivey (Mrs. Lomax); Tamara Tunie (Jackie); Ruben Santiago-Hudson (Leamon Heath); Debra Monk (Pam Garrety); Vyto Ruganis (Weaver); Heather Matarazzo (Barbara); Leo Burmeister (Prosecutor); Pamela Gray (Diana Barzoon); Laura Harrington (Melissa Black); George Wyner (Meisel).

CREW: Warner Bros. and Regency Enterprises Present a Taylor Hackford film. *CASTING:* Nancy Klopfer, Mary Colquhoun. *Costume Designer:* Judianna Makovsky. *Visual Effects Design:* Richard Greenberg. *Demons Designed and Created by:* Rick Baker. *Music:* James Newton Howard. *Co-Producer:* Stephen Brown. *Film Editor:* Mark Warner. *Production Designer:* Bruno Rubeo. *Director of Photography:* Andrzej Bartkowiak. *Based on the novel by:* Andrew Neiderman. *Executive Producers:* Michael Tedross. Ernie Stoff, Barry Bernardi, Steve White, Taylor Hackford. *Produced by:* Arnon Milchan, Arnold and Anne

Kopelson. *Written by:* Johnathan Lemkin and Tony Gilroy. *Directed by:* Taylor Hackford. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 142 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After an uninterrupted streak of wins in the courtroom, Kevin Lomax (Reeves), the best trial lawyer in Florida, is invited to New York City to join a ritzy Manhattan firm run by the charismatic and fiery John Milton (Pacino). Kevin takes his prone-to-depression wife, Mary Ann (Theron), to the city, where the couple is treated like royalty. Soon, however, Kevin finds that he is making moral compromises, particularly as in regards to defending a murderer named Cullen (Nelson). As Mary Ann grows ever more despondent, Kevin begins to thrive on the publicity his position affords him. Eventually, he learns that John Milton is actually his father ... and a lot more than that ... the Devil Himself.

COMMENTARY: The 1990s was the decade of the courtroom. The O.J. Simpson murder trial, the so-called "trial of the century," aired for one-hundred and thirty-three consecutive days on daytime television before the controversial verdict was read on October 3, 1995. The 1990s also brought the sensational murder trial of brothers/murderers Erik and Lyle Menendez in 1993, which was aired on a network devoted to just such noteworthy trials, Court TV.

There were actually quite a few notorious murderers in the 1990s, from Susan Smith to Jeffrey Dahmer. A question thus arose: what would it take to go into a courtroom and defend an O.J. Simpson? A Menendez brother? A Jeffrey Dahmer? At what point does it stop being a duty and obligation to provide a fair defense to all and become too heavy a price for the soul to bear?

The colorful, often wicked *The Devil's Advocate* answers that question. It features Keanu Reeves as Kevin Lomax, a hot-shot trial attorney, "the best damn lawyer in Nashua County," who has an unspoiled streak of victories in defense cases. He defends child molesters and sees it all as a game.



John Milton (Al Pacino) rages at God in *The Devil's Advocate* (1997).

In one sickening scene, Kevin targets the victim of child molestation and creates reasonable doubt in the jury about her accusations. The question for Kevin, then, is one of priorities. What's more important, seeing justice done? Or winning? Again, given all the sensational trials of the 1990s that's no small issue.

Soon New York City, a "dwelling place of demons" according to Kevin's religious mother, comes calling for him. Powerful attorney John Milton wants the talented Lomax in his firm. He'll come in handy picking juries, especially in the high-profile case of Alex Cullen (Craig T. Nelson), a prominent Manhattan businessman who has murdered his wife, stepson and maid. Kevin makes the move to Manhattan with his wife, Mary Ann, and slides into opulence, fame and fortune. But it all comes from his need to win, not his need to see justice done.



Kevin Lomax (Keanu Reeves, standing) enjoys a boxing match and other perks of the job, while Milton (Pacino, lower left) laughs in *The Devil's Advocate*.

The dark side of the equation is that John Milton is the Devil himself, the element of this movie that takes it overtly into the horror genre. Lucifer has had his hand in the moral cookie jar too, dealing in money-laundering, toxic-waste dumping and even gun-running. In the film's most stunning sequence, Pacino delivers—in a tour-de-force performance—a courtroom-styled "closing argument" in defense of himself, creating reasonable doubt about God.

"I'm a humanist," he suggests, touting the concept of free will. He notes that God is an underachiever while he, the Devil, is responsible for everything that has happened in the 20th century. Milton even explains why he is a lawyer. "Because the law puts us into everything," he explains. "It's the new priesthood." Yet the law isn't about belief. It isn't about spirituality, it's about who wins and who loses. And in the American judicial system, he who wins is also usually the person with the biggest bank account, able to afford the best lawyers. This is an overturning of God's justice in the deepest sense imaginable. No wonder the Devil gets off on it.

In terms of Kevin, what *The Devil's Advocate* finally concludes is that he has succumbed to the sin of vanity. The entirety of the film's narrative is sort of *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946) in reverse, with Kevin living a dream of the terrible things that could happen, should he

choose to accept the dominion of Milton. It was vanity—the need to win—that made him defend the child molester when he knew better. It was vanity, *self love*, that led him to abandon his beautiful wife. He couldn't stand how she was coming to reflect on him and his quest for success.

And, in the movie's amusing epilogue, it is suggested that vanity is the avenue through which Milton will attempt to get at Kevin yet again. This time, by pretending to be a reporter and arranging a TV interview with the hot shot lawyer.

"All is vanity," right?

The Devil's Advocate is caustic and crude, but the film is ever so memorable because of the devil's rantings. In one sequence—played over the death of a snitch named Barzoon—the Devil goes on at length about "God's special creature," mankind. He talks about a creature with "egos the size of cathedrals" in a world where "each human becomes his own God." He describes a world where futures are bought and sold, but there is no future left.

Arriving at the tail-end of the 20th century, in a prosperous, fabulously wealthy America, *The Devil's Advocate* presents its case against mankind. It shows man to be a venal and vain creature. Even worse, many of the people on Milton's team don't have the good sense to be modest, or feel guilty about what they do, about the rules they break.

"Guilt is like a bag of fucking bricks," says the Devil, lit from below and looking extremely evil. "All you got to do is set it down."

Filled with diabolical and compelling insights like that, one can't help but consider that *The Devil's Advocate* gets the verdict it seeks. Mankind is guilty as charged.

***Event Horizon* * * * 1/2**

Critical Reception

"*Event Horizon* is such an excellent horror film that it is extremely unpleasant to watch. And, perversely, that must be a feather in the director's cap. This is popcorn-spilling, seat-wetting terror at its most wicked. Get used to sleeping with the lights on."—Winston Aldworth, *Sunday Star-Times*, "New Heights in Inspired Terror," November 16, 1997, page F4

" *Event Horizon* is not just an intimate Oedipal battle between creator and creature; the scientist has opened the doors to an apocalyptic force that does not simply wipe out individuals in a split second of Armageddon, but drives them fury-mad before pulling their bodies apart limb from limb."—Geoff King and Tony Krzwinska, *Short Cuts: Science Fiction Cinema from Outer Space to Cyberspace*, Wallflower Press, 2002, page 53

Cast and Crew

CAST: Laurence Fishburne (Captain Miller); Sam Neill (Dr. Weir); Kathleen Quinlan (Peters); Joely Richardson (Starck); Richard T. Jones (Cooper); Jack Noseworthy (Mr. Justin); Jason Isaacs (D.J.); Sean Pertwee (Smitty); Peter Marinker (Captain Kilpack); Holly Chant (Claire); Barclay Wright (Denny Peters); Noah Huntley (Edward Corrick); Robert Jezek (Rescue 1 Technician).

CREW: Paramount Pictures and Lawrence Gordon Present a Golar Production in association with Impact Pictures, a Paul Anderson Film. *Casting:* Deborah Aquila, Jane Shannon-Smith, John and Ross Hubbard. *Music:* Michael Kamen. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* Richard Yurich. *Film Editor:* Martin Hunter. *Production Designer:* Joseph Bennett. *Director of Photography:* Adrian Riddle. *Executive Producer:* Nick Gillott. *Written by:* Philip Eisner. *Produced by:* Lawrence Gordon, Lloyd Levin, Jeremy Bolt. *Directed by:* Paul Anderson. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

INCANTATION: "Hell is only a word. The reality is much worse."—Dr. Weir (Sam Neill) describes "the other side" of the event horizon in the 1997 film of that name

SYNOPSIS: In the year 2047, the rescue space vessel *Lewis and Clark* ventures out beyond Neptune when a transmission is received from the *Event Horizon*, a spaceship that disappeared there after setting out to "explore the boundaries of the solar system" seven years earlier. Aboard *Lewis and Clark* is the *Event Horizon's* unstable creator, Dr. Weir (Neill), who suspects that his faster-than-light drive sent the long-missing spaceship through some kind of dimensional gateway. The crew of the *Lewis and Clark* finds that the *Event Horizon* has returned from its sojourn to a universe of "pure evil" and "pure chaos" as a malevolent living entity. And worse, a sadistic one that wants

them to suffer ... eternally.

COMMENTARY: Although it couldn't have been planned that way, the summer of 1997 transported imaginative cinema to two opposite poles.

Contact starring Jodie Foster posited the notion of outer space as a kind of beatific, heavenly realm where humans could encounter dead loved ones (really aliens) and grapple (positively) with inner personal demons. And the only way to reach this utopian realm was through a manmade (alien-designed) device that looked like a giant rotating sphere.

Later that very summer, the spinning sphere device returned, but this time as Dr. Weir's gravity-drive mechanism aboard a spaceship engine room. And this time, in the space-bound *Event Horizon*, the doorway opened up to a dark, hopeless dimension: a world of total evil and total chaos.

A yin and yang approach to the nature of space and the nature of mankind, all in one summer, and both films proving pretty strong ones at that.

The walk on the dark side, *Event Horizon*, has often been described as " *The Shining* in Space," relocating Evil from a lonely hotel in Colorado to a doomed spacecraft in orbit around Neptune. The description seems apt, right down to the presence of a blood flood in both productions. And just as *The Shining's* Overlook was a living, malevolent thing that needed tending to, so is the ship *Event Horizon* infused with a conscience of evil and desirous, apparently, of a caretaker. That's the role Weir eventually fulfills.

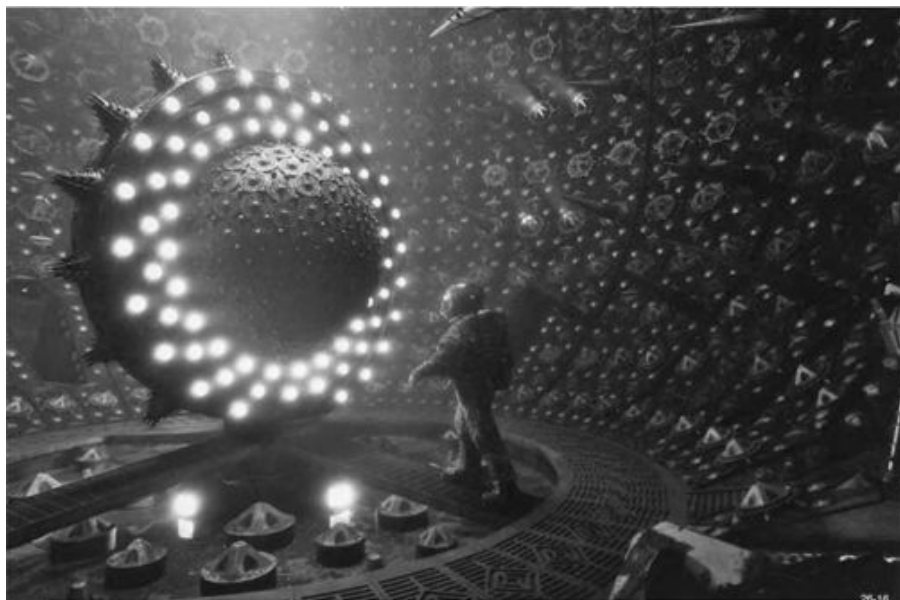
In both films, production design plays a critical role. In *The Shining*, the endless corridors of the Overlook and the hedge maze form a trap for the losing-it Jack Nicholson, a kind of Moebius strip of evil. Here, the *Event Horizon* interiors resemble the unholy combination of high-tech computer-age equipment with medieval, gothic torture chambers, consisting of metal spires and thick, dark pillars. The message seems to be that no matter how far he advances, man takes his past (and his nature) with him.

The actual exterior of the craft, if seen from the right angle, resembles a giant, high-tech crucifix. And again, observed from the correct angle, it may be *an upside-down* crucifix, especially given the evil nature of the vessel upon its return from Hell.

The evil *Event Horizon* entity quickly proves capable of analyzing

its new crew (from the rescue ship *Lewis and Clark*) and exploiting their fears and weaknesses. These scenes of humans broaching their worst memories and deepest fears are at once pulse-pounding, bloody set-pieces and specific reflections of horror and sci-ficinema traditions.

Kathleen Quinlan's demise serves as an homage to *Don't Look Now* (1973), with a redslickered little tyke giving her character, Peters, a run for her money around the bowels of the evil ship.



Justin (Jack Noseworthy) nears the gravity drive and gateway to Hell itself in *Event Horizon* (1997).

Another death sequence, involving Jake Noseworthy, updates the horrific decompression scenes from *Outland* (1981).

And the overall idea of *Event Horizon*, that of something ostensibly inanimate—like a planet or a ship—feeding/playing off the thoughts of fallible human beings, is a dark rendering of the central tenet of Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1973).

Some film-goers may rightly suggest that *Event Horizon* owes something to Disney's *The Black Hole* (1979) too, which also concerned a missing spaceship and a doorway to another dimension beyond "the event horizon" of a collapsed star. Finally, in the twisted physical appearance of Dr. Weir after his visit to the realm of the demonic, many fans see shadows and resonances of the Cenobites and Clive Barker's *Hellraiser* (1987).

Yet what elevates *Event Horizon* beyond a laundry list of familiar movie ingredients is its commentary on human nature ... and human suffering.

If one considers Dr. Weir to be the film's central character, one can also detect how all the horror, in some sense, emerges from his sense of hopelessness and pain following the suicide of his wife, Claire (Holley Chant). We infer from the film that Weir—a genius—selected his career (and hence, the *Event Horizon* itself) over real intimacy and understanding with his wife. The "tipping" point for him occurs when the *Event Horizon* stages this suicide for him ... in bloody, living color. He can't stand the ugliness that he, in some sense, has been "father" of, and so he rips his very eyes out. He surrenders to the darkness. He becomes servant to the "son" his actions created.

The important thing to consider here is that the *Event Horizon* is a ship. It was constructed from blueprints and schematics. But why would anybody in their right mind build a ship that looked this ... *byzantine*? That was so uncomfortable? The answers, again, hail from Weir's human psychology.

He gave over his marriage and his wife for the *Event Horizon* project, and that fact colored the very creation of this thing. He created the gravity drive and it went to a "dark place" perhaps, in honor of its very creator. Weir's psychology is externalized as that monstrous ship, and even, perhaps, in the ship's choice of destinations (a realm of pure, eternal evil).



Left to right: Captain Miller (Laurence Fishburne), Dr. Weir (Sam Neill), Peters (Kathleen Quinlan) and D.J. (Jason Isaacs) study information about the *Event Horizon* in the film of the same name.

This view of a human Hell is countered specifically by Captain Miller (Fishburne) who sacrifices his life so that his crew (or what's left of his crew) might survive. Just as Claire took her own life in a moment of utter hopelessness, and Weir eventually follows her to that gravity pool of despair and suffering, Miller goes to the "dark place" but for a powerful, optimistic, self-less reason.

Studying *Event Horizon* in terms of human morality, the film emerges as, perhaps, a deeper effort than many realize. The term "event horizon" comes from general relativity, from a specific kind of boundary in time/space (usually around a black hole) from which light cannot escape. Perhaps this description also fits Weir. He's a bit of a monster already, as his design of the *Event Horizon* suggests, and after the death of his wife, light cannot reach him. It is no wonder that he blindly accepts nihilism and despair in the film's third act ... this is indeed how he has come to see human life, a direct contrast to Miller's self-less act.



Director Paul Anderson takes the controls on the set of Paramount's *Event Horizon* (1997).

In 2011, it may escape viewers' attention, but in 1997, *Event Horizon* diagrammed its theme of the "dark within" echoed by the "dark outside" with absolutely state-of-the-art special effects, creating in that isolated spaceship a futuristic equivalent to the house in *The Haunting* (1962) or the hotel in *The Shining* (1980).

At times, the darkness of the film is literally all-consuming, and it seems to throb with a sense of real, palpable evil. The moment during which the ship's S.O.S. signal is translated as "Save yourself from Hell" is downright creepy, but it's more than that. It's a hint that the original crew was misdirected. First in positing the Hell as being "outside" of them rather than a part of them, and secondly in suggesting the answer as being one in which you can save yourself. That's clearly not an option: Miller only beats the *Event Horizon* by letting it take him, and, at the same time, allowing his crew to escape.

The only antidote to Hell, the film seems to state, is in acknowledging the things that bind humans together, in doing something for your fellow man. And again, that's a direct contrast to

Neill's Weir, who built a ship that, like Stephen King's *Christine*, was born bad.

I Know What You Did Last Summer * * *

Critical Reception

"*I Know What You Did Last Summer* works for me on many levels, and while it gets knocked a lot in horror circles, largely because of the appalling mess that passes for a sequel, I think the criticism is a little unfair, and that this is actually one of the best teen slasher movies of the 1990s."—Richard Cosgrove, *To Die For: 25 Saturday Night Fright Flicks*, House of Darcy, 2007, page 86

"... nothing to *Scream* about."—David Bleiler, *TLA Video & DVD Guide: The Discerning Film Lover's Guide*, St. Martin's Griffin, 2005, page 297

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jennifer Love Hewitt (Julie James); Sarah Michelle Gellar (Helen Shivers); Ryan Phillippe (Barry Cox); Freddie Prinze, Jr. (Ray Bronson); Johnny Galecki (Max); Bridgette Wilson (Elsa); Anne Heche (Missy Egan); Muse Watson (Ben Willis).

CREW: Mandalay Entertainment, a Neal Moritz Production.
Casting: Mary Vernieu. *Music:* John Debney. *Film Editor:* Steve Mirkovich. *Production Designer:* Gary Wissner. *Director of Photography:* Dennis Crossan. *Executive Producer:* William S. Beasley. *Produced by:* Neal H. Moritz, Eric Feig, Stokely Chaffin. *Written by:* Kevin Williamson. *Directed by:* Jim Gillespie. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 101 minutes.

P.O.V.: "I made it very clear when I took the first meeting that I was not going to make a slasher film."⁶⁹—director Jim Gillespie insists that *I Know What You Did Last Summer* is not a horror movie

SYNOPSIS: On the eve of their departure for college, four graduating

high school students from the North Carolina fishing community of South Port become involved in a late night hit-and-run on a dark, seaside road. Julie (Hewitt), Helen (Gellar), Barry (Phillippe) and Ray (Prinze) promise to cover up the accident and never speak of it again. A year later, however, when all four co-eds return to South Port, they begin receiving mysterious and vaguely threatening notes reading "I Know What You Did Last Summer." Soon, an avenging lunatic dressed as a Fisherman (Watson) begins to hunt down each of those he deems responsible for the events of the previous summer. The killer strikes on the evening of July 4th...

COMMENTARY: After *Scream* (1996), Wes Craven's incredibly successful collaboration with Kevin Williamson set the box office ablaze in 1996, it wasn't long before new films of the slasher paradigm appeared at multiplexes. One of the most successful was *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, based very loosely on a novel by Lois Duncan. *I Know What You Did Last Summer* also came from the pen (or PC) of Williamson, and, like *Scream*— it updates the popular 1980s horror paradigm with a moral, media-savvy, self-referential component.

I Know What You Did Last Summer succeeds largely because it has one foot in the past and one in the 1990s. The slasher paradigm is re-instated here with many familiar components. The events of the film take place during a holiday or celebratory event (July 4th and the Croaker Festival), and, likewise, on the anniversary of that event. A "transgression"—an immoral decision on the part of the film's young protagonists—is the act that spurs a slasher to action. Furthermore, that slasher is differentiated from the other *dramatis personae* in terms of appearance, wearing a costume, a slicker. He also boasts an unusual and distinctive weapon: a fishing hook.

The movie's victim pool involves several familiar characters. These include Barry Cox (Ryan Phillippe) as the arrogant jock, Helen Shivers (Sarah Michelle Gellar) as the beauty queen (or cheerleader type), and Ray Bronson (Freddie Prinze, Jr.) as the kid from the wrong side of the tracks.

Another character, Max (Johnny Galecki), plays the important role of the "red herring," the person suspected of being a killer because, in this case, he is of a different social class than the other teens, apparently, a blue-collar local with no clear path out of the small town. All the other kids are college-bound or career-bound, or so they believe.

Julie James (Jennifer Love Hewitt) is *I Know What You Did Last Summer's* final girl, the one character with a heightened sense of

insight and morality. Pretty much alone, she argues to go to the authorities after the transgression (the accidental death on the road of a human being). Pretty much alone, she accepts the fact that the group is being punished and attacked for their behavior. In the tradition of final girls like Laurie Strode in *Halloween*, Julie James is less superficial and callow than those she chooses to call friends, and thus able to countenance more successfully the evil which confronts her.

Useless authority, another convention of the paradigm, is on hand here too. Neither the police nor Helen's alcoholic father prove effective in stopping the onslaught of the Fisherman. The sting in the tail/tale ending, the final "jolt" and set-up for a sequel, is also deployed in the film.



A night of promise turns sour for (left to right) Ray (Freddie Prinze, Jr.), Julie (Jennifer Love Hewitt), Helen (Sarah Michelle Gellar) and Barry (Ryan Phillippe) in the slasher revival film *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997).



Director Jim Gillespie (right) offers direction to Jennifer Love Hewitt on the set of *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997).

These are the old familiar shapes of the 1980s slasher films, but in keeping with the 1990s, Kevin Williamson has updated them to seem meaningful again. Available technology had changed a great deal since 1978–1985, the heyday of the slasher, so tropes like the "library of doom" have been recast using web searches and the Internet. More meaningfully, there's something at play here beyond the depiction of superficial, partying youth that was evident in the old slasher films.

By contrast, the four starring youngsters of *I Know What You Did Last Summer* project a cynicism and feeling that they grew up too fast, that they learned too much too soon. Taken as a whole, the group does not see the accident victim as a human being, as an individual. Instead, he is immediately considered an impediment to a successful collective future.

Each of the four characters sees a dream shattered by this overt lack of a governing moral code. After making the incorrect moral decision (hiding their crime), they continue with their lives and soon find out "the secret is killing" them. At first this is metaphorical. They all seem to be the victims of bad luck. Helen fails to make it as an actress in New York. She returns to her home town only as a "washed-up, dried-up" has-been, an "outgoing Queen" at the Croaker Festival. Barry and Helen break up too.

Even serious, smart Ray ends up a local fisherman, to his disappointment. "I've become my father," he laments. And Julie, the most moral of the bunch, suffers from depression and receives poor grades at law school. Julie, it is said, "looks like death."

Then the secret literally starts to kill these youngsters when the Fisherman shows up. "It's about secrets and how they can kill us," reported Kevin Williamson, of the film. "These are four incredibly bright kids who are all growing up and coming of age and then something terrible happens. They have a choice to either come clean and tell the truth, or cover up and lie. Of course they make the wrong choice."⁷⁰

Williamson's statement captures something essential of the 1990s youth movement. The teens of this era are indeed incredibly bright, able to integrate a slew of new technologies into their lives, from the Internet to cell phones, but, it seems, they have difficulty making moral choices. Inevitably, when we look at the Columbine killers, Melissa Drexler, or other teens of the decade, they seem to choose wrong. *I Know What You Did Last Summer's* teens are knowledgeable, whip smart, have veritable master's degrees in pop culture references, and absolutely no governing sense of what is right or wrong.

It is easy and popular, especially among the older generation of horror enthusiasts, to dismiss the slasher revival and films like *I Know What You Did Last Summer* as being a product of a WB or *Dawson's Creek* mentality, especially given the participation of Kevin Williamson, Dawson's creator.

Yet in the case of *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, as in *Scream*, there is actually an underlying criticism or observation about the WB generation, about the youths of the 1990s. They are heroes, yes, but they are not without flaws. Not flawed necessarily in the vice-precedes slice-and-death fashion of the old slashers, where bad behavior—sex and drugs—promised conservative punishment, but something else. It's deeper than that in these films.

The teens are often depicted (in both films) as being callous and heartless until they are forced, by circumstances and slashers, to be different.

A generation that grew up with the VCR as babysitter comes of age in *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and can quip about *Murder She Wrote* and *Silence of the Lambs* but can't face up to its own responsibilities in the community—the responsibility to tell the truth and possibly face a future that doesn't include fame and fortune.

I Know What You Did Last Summer succeeds as a cracking good slasher movie, and one scene is especially suspenseful. Late in the

film, Helen is pursued by the Fisherman and the chase goes from department store to attic to busy avenue and is well-edited and nail-biting. In peril and pursued by the Fisherman, Sarah Michelle Gellar gives the scene and the movie a real lift. She really seems to be fighting for her life. Once her Helen Shivers is eliminated by the Fisherman, the movie is never quite as powerful again.

It's easy to look at the surface of *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and conclude by the impossibly good-looking young actors, the Norman Rockwell scenery, and the self-referential pop culture clips that the movie is just a glitzy, shallow movie. On the contrary, however, the movie actually concerns shallow, glitzy young people who learn the hard way, that, to quote *Scream*, even if their life is a movie, they can't pick their genre.

Actions have consequences, and there's no guarantee of fame and fortune in your future just because you think you deserve it. Other people have plans to, and those plans don't include being left for dead so you can star on *Guiding Light*. This thematic strand brings us right back to the films of the early 1990s like *Flatliners* or *Ghost*, wherein a moral order is re-asserted after the Yuppie Era.

The slasher revival spearheaded by Kevin Williamson is but the latest, and perhaps most effective, re-tooling of the message. It's youthskewing, it's geared towards a hip audience, and it's deadly serious.

***Jack Frost* * * 1/2 (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Chris Allport (Sam Tiler); Stephen Mendel (Agent Manners); F. William Parker (Paul Davrow); Rob La Belle (Stone); Eileen Seeley (Anne Tiler); Chip Heller (Deputy Foster); Jack Lindine (Jake Metzner); Brian Leckner (Deputy Pullman); Zack Eginton (Ryan Tiler); Darren Campbell (Tommy); Shannon Elizabeth (Jill); Marsha Clark (Marla); Kelly Jean Peters (Sally); Scott MacDonald (Jack Frost); Paul Keith (Doc Peters); Charles Stevenson, Jr. (Father Branagh).

CREW: A Storyteller Film. *Casting:* Lisa Bankert. *Music:* Chris Anderson, Carl Shurtz. *Special Makeup Effects:* SMG Inc. *Production Design:* Deborah Raymond, Dorian Vernacchio. *Snowman Created by:* Total Fabrication. *Snowman Supervisor and Make-up Effects:* Mike Deak. *Film Editor:* Terry Kelley. *Director of Photography:* Dean Lent. *Executive*

Producer: Barry Collier, Barbara Javitz. *Story by:* Jeremy Paige, Michael Cooney. *Produced by:* Jeremy Paige, Vicki Slotnick. *Written and directed by:* Michael Cooney. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Captured serial killer Jack Frost (MacDonald) is transformed into a monstrous snowman after his "state executional transport vehicle" collides with a Genetic Research van on the road. Transformed into a creature made of ice by a toxic, experimental material, Frost soon sets his murderous sights on the small town sheriff, Sam Tiler (Allport), who put him away. Frost heads for the town of Snomonton and unleashes a cold wave of terror.

COMMENTARY: One of the most ridiculous genre movies you'll ever see, *Jack Frost* is actually a good representation of the 1990s American horror film, a silly amalgam of all the decade's most overused conventions and stereotypes. Specifically, the villain is a supernatural serial killer (cliché #1) who was created by science run amok (cliché #2). The final battle takes place in a small town and involves a town sheriff (cliché #3), and the villain's final menacing form is that of a grim fairy tale monster: the Jack Frost of myth and legend (cliché #4).

Featuring exaggerated performances and sound effects and some really goofy (and funny) dialogue, *Jack Frost*, not entirely unlike *Dr. Giggles* before it, throws everything but the kitchen sink at its narrative's organizing principle: a murderous snowman on a killing spree at Christmastime.

In other words, the film re-purposes the Holiday-themed "Silent Night" as creepy mood music, utilizes a child's sleigh as a bloody murder weapon for a decapitation, and with a straight face applies sound logic to the particulars of Jack Frost's condition. By that last bit I mean that the cops arm themselves with hair-dryers in an effort to melt the evil snowman. Naturally, the use of hair-dryers requires Jack's off-color rejoinder: "Blow me!"

Yep, it's that kind of movie. It's low budget nonsense and yet fun. The monster, Jack Frost, looks totally ridiculous—an ambulatory snowman—whether he's shooting icicles out of his hands, decorating a victim like a Christmas tree, or melting himself down to water so he can stalk his victim through a doggie-door.

Tongue-in-cheek, but never boring, *Jack Frost* is the movie *Leprechaun* wishes it were.

Commendably, this movie is more than just bland oatmeal laced with anti-freeze, to coin a phrase. *Jack Frost* grasps ever-so-briefly for some kind of thematic profundity in the acknowledgment that the soul exists, that the human soul "is a chemical."

Okay, so that's the only reach for subtlety you'll find in a movie that takes place in the town of Snomonton, features a sex scene to a jazz rendition of the "Twelve Days of Christmas," and whose valedictory punch-line is "we iced him!"

But beggars can't be choosers, and *Jack Frost* has a lot of fun with its ridiculous premise and silly monster. And it's still better than the 1998 family movie of the same name, starring Michael Keaton.

***Kiss the Girls* * ***

Critical Reception

"... *Kiss the Girls* is a diverting, but shallow, restaging of Morgan Freeman's excellent performance in *Seven*."— William Thompson, *The Anchorage Press*, "*Kiss the Girls*," October 23–27, 1997, Volume 6, Edition 42

"The whole thing seems a little worn, and a bit too much like a brazen attempt to cash in on winning formulas...."—Keith Phipps, *The Onion A.V. Club*, "*Kiss the Girls*," March 29, 2002

Cast and Crew

CAST: Morgan Freeman (Alex Cross); Ashley Judd (Kate McTiernan); Cary Elwes (Nick Ruskin); Tony Goldwyn (Will Rudolph); Jay O'Sanders (Kyle Craig); Bill Nunn (Detective John Sampson); Brian Cox (Chief Hatfield); Alex McArthur (Sikes); Richard T. Jones (Seth); Jeremy Piven (Detective Castillo); Roma Maffia (Dr. Ruocco); Gina Ravera (Naomi Cross); Helen Martin (Nana Cross); Mena Suvari (Coty Pierce); W. Earl Brown (Locksmith).

CREW: Paramount Pictures presents in association with Rysher Entertainment, a David Brown/ Joe Wizan Production. *Casting:* Deborah Aquila, Jane Shannon-Smith. *Music:* Mark Isham. *Costume Designer:* Abigail Murray. *Film Editors:* William Steinkamp, Harvey Rosenstock. *Production Designer:* Nelson Coates. *Director of Photography:* Aaron Schneider. *Executive Producer:* C.O. Erickson. *Based on the novel by:* James Patterson. *Written by:* David Klass. *Produced by:*

David Brown and Joe Wizan. *Directed by:* Gary Fleder. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 117 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Forensic psychologist and bestselling author Alex Cross (Freeman) travels to Durham, N.C., to locate his missing niece, Naomi (Ravera), who has been abducted by the serial killer who calls himself Casanova. Meanwhile, another woman, an intern named Kate (Judd), is also abducted by the killer. She escapes Casanova's underground "dungeon" and joins Cross in hunting the madman down. To Cross and Kate's horror, there may be more than one killer at work.

COMMENTARY: *Kiss the Girls* is yet another 1990s era police procedural involving the hunt for a nicknamed serial killer (or in this case, two of 'em). The movie features a red herring (a doctor who likes sex with co-eds), obnoxious Southern cops, female victims, and a lead detective who is practically God-like in his wisdom and knowledge. Like many blockbuster films of the 1990s, the film lacks any definitive sense of edge or nuance. It's all very dramatic and, ultimately, remarkably shallow ... even re-assuring in its adherence to convention. In comparison with bracing, disturbing serial killer efforts like *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) or *Se7en* (1995), or hell, even *Resurrection* (1999), *Kiss the Girls* is pretty soft.



Nick Ruskin (Cary Elwes, left) and Davey Sikes (Alex McArthur, center) meet detective Alex Cross (Morgan Freeman) on a case involving a serial killer called Casanova in *Kiss the Girls* (1997).

The lead character in *Kiss the Girls* is detective Alex Cross, played by Morgan Freeman. And the movie really piles it on in regards to his abilities. He is the only person who can diagnose a problem with Kate's drugs after she is rescued, he defuses violent stand-offs, and even—a black man— gains the immediate respect of racist cops in the Deep South. Cross also makes correct deduction after correct deduction, making Sherlock Holmes look like a slacker by comparison.

By contrast, Ashley Judd's final girl, Kate, really captures the imagination, the very reason she is abducted by Casanova, apparently. Judd has a joy and presence about her that is captivating, and once the film gets to Kate's time in captivity in the dungeon, it really works. The audience is totally invested in her escape attempts and her interactions with Casanova.

Even so, the film's final gambit is ridiculous. Kate manages to shoot a pistol through a milk carton to muzzle the gunpowder flash in a kitchen filled with gas. This is after she asks the killer (still not revealed) for that "big chopping knife."

Kiss the Girls makes mention of real-life killers Leopold and Loeb, and they appear to be the models for the Gentleman Caller and Casanova. There's also a strange Southern strategy at work here. Cary Elwes plays Casanova with a Southerndrawl, and even sets up his headquarters in an "Old Plantation," another symbol of the Deep South. And, of course, an African American is the one to save the day.

In terms of presentation, *Kiss the Girls* is hit or miss. Kate's escape from the plantation into the woods after briefly incapacitating Casanova is genuinely harrowing. It ends with a death-defying jump to freedom from a high precipice. The scene works, however, not just because of the quick cutting, the moving camera and the occasional P.O.V. shot but because, perhaps, we care about this character and the outcome.

By contrast, the Gentleman Caller's escape from Cross by night is so ineptly staged that audiences have time to register that Cross could have shot the car and the killer a dozen times before he fled ... but doesn't.

Why doesn't he? The script requires an escape at this juncture.



In *Kiss the Girls*, wrong-headed superior Chief Hatfield (Brian Cox, left) and Ruskin (Elwes, center) discuss the serial killer case with Cross (Morgan Freeman).

Director Gary Fleder also doesn't quite pull off the climactic scene at the dungeon, during which Alex frees Naomi and Casanova's other women. There's a lot of running around through the woods, a lot of confusion, and, unforgivably, Kate's character isn't involved in the proceedings. This is roughly like leaving Clarice Starling out of the final battle to stop Buffalo Bill.

I can't really argue that *Kiss the Girls* is a terrible movie. Rather it plays by the rules of the serial killer paradigm without variation or much curiosity. It entertains in a basic, big-budget mindless, Hollywood sort of fashion, but doesn't illuminate any aspect of the horror genre or the decade's most famous monster.

The serial killer here, Casanova, is pretty shallow and uninteresting: he just wants people to love him. At its best, the serial killer format gazes at a sickness in the human soul and tries to understand it.

In the best examples of the form, there aren't many easy answers.

In mainstream thrillers like *Kiss the Girls*, it's all just good guys versus bad guys, and here it is literally black versus white.

***Leprechaun 4: In Space* ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Warwick Davis (Leprechaun); Brent Jasmer (Books); Rebekah Carlton (Princess Zarina); Jessica Collins (Tina); Tim Colceri (Metal Head); Miguel Nunez, Jr. (Sticks); Debbie Dunning (Delores); Gary Grossman (Harold); Guy Siner (Dr. Mittenhand); Rick Pictoris (Mooch); Geoff Meed (Kowalski); Ladd York (Lucky).

CREW: Trimark Pictures presents a Trimark/Blue Rider Production. *Casting:* Tedra Gabriel. *Make-up Special Effects:* Gabe Bartalos. *Production Designers:* Dorian Vernacchio, Deborah Raymond. *Music:* Dennis Michael Tenney. *Film Editor:* Daniel Duncan. *Director of Photography:* David Lewis. *Executive Producer:* Mark Amin. *Based on characters created by:* Mark Jones. *Produced by:* Jeff Geoffray, Walter Josten. *Written by:* Dennis Pratt. *Directed by:* Brian Trenchard-Smith. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

INCANTATION: "As Shakespeare said ... shit happens."—A philosophical Leprechaun ... in space.

SYNOPSIS: In the 21st century, a platoon of space marines descend on the planet Ithacon to stop what they believe is an alien threat interfering with mining operations. What they find is the malevolent Leprechaun (Davis), who is now courting the Princess Zarina (Carlton) in hopes of becoming a powerful, planetary king. The Leprechaun is apparently killed planet-side, but revives on the Marine ship and bursts out of the crotch of a horny space marine. He attempts to re-take his prospective bride, even as the insane Dr. Mittenhand (Siner) learns that Zarina possess amazing regenerative powers.

COMMENTARY: Warwick Davis's titular boogeyman takes to the stars as his destination, in the cheap-jack *Leprechaun 4: In Space*, an interminable collection of stupid riffs on famous science fiction and horror movies. Replete with *Babylon 5*-style early CGI, the movie looks as though it's an episode of a bad syndicated action show of the 1990s, one starring Pamela Anderson.

The dedicated and masochistic genre fan might glean some minimal amusement from *Leprechaun 4*'s numerous "tributes" to classic genre films. The main template is, of course, the *Alien* film series. In *Leprechaun 4: In Space*, the heroes are all space marines (like the characters featured in James Cameron's *Aliens* [1986]). Meanwhile, spaceship crew-members complain about their work

contracts (as do Parker and Brett in Ridley Scott's *Alien*).

And—in the film's *raison d'être*— the Leprechaun escapes, chest-burster-style, from the penis of an aroused soldier. In the end, the Leprechaun is disposed of by being ejected from the airlock (following a shipboard auto-destruct sequence). Not coincidentally, that was also the fate of the xenomorph in the 1979 *Alien*.

Leprechaun 4 is a (stinky) grab-bag of such genre homage, casting a wide, stupid net. The villainous Cyborg, Dr. Mittenhand, is actually a tribute to Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove character, occasionally given to mad, quasi-Nazi dialogue about galactic domination. And, when Mittenhand is transformed by the Leprechaun into a grotesque mutant spider called "Mitten Spider," you'll be reminded of Jeff Goldblum's Brundle Fly from Cronenberg's remake of *The Fly* (1986).

Otherwise, there's an "Amazing Colossal Leprechaun" scene in which Davis's character swells to monumental proportions, a moment when the Leprechaun arms himself with a light saber, *à la Star Wars*, and even a passing "Oh, the pain!" joke, reminiscent of *Lost in Space*'s Dr. Smith (Jonathan Harris). The "pain" reference seems particularly apt, given the overall quality of this movie.

A good horror movie ought to be more than a series of silly sketches, and *Leprechaun 4: In Space* is just incredibly dull and badly acted. The idea and title of *Leprechaun 4: In Space* are in-finitely more amusing than anything that occurs in the actual film.

This "ultimate trip" even ends in ridiculous fashion here, with the de-compressed Leprechaun floating in space, giving the surviving space marines an upturned middle finger. I take that as a metaphor for the movie's approach to its audience.

***Lost Highway* * * * ***

Critical Reception

"... there are some striking scenes, moments that fill the eyes and others that rattle the brain. But in the end, audiences may come away wondering what the heck was the point."—Chris Hicks, *Deseret News*, March 21, 1997

"*Lost Highway* is a wild ride of doubles and doppelgangers, time shifts, surreal images and plot twists that will rattle around in your mind long after the film is over."—*MSN Movies*, "*Lost Highway*," <http://movies.msn.com/movies/movie-on-dvd/lost-highway/>

highway/

"a virtuoso symphony of bad vibes."—David Edelstein, *Slate*, *Road Kill. David Lynch in Decay*, February 26, 1997, page 1 of 1

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bill Pullman (Fred Madison); Patricia Arquette (Renee Madison/Alice Wakefield); Balthazar Getty (Peter Dayton); Robert Blake (Mystery Man); Natasha Gregson Wagner (Sheila); Richard Pryor (Arnie); Lucy Butler (Candayce Dayton); Henry Rollins (Guard); Giovanni Ribisi (Steve); Scott Coffey (Teddy); Gary Busey (Bill Dayton); Robert Loggia (Dick Laurent).

CREW: A CIBY 2000/Asymmetrical Production. *Casting:* Johanna Ray, Elaine J. Huzzar. *Music:* Angelo Badalamenti. *Film Editor:* Mary Sweeney. *Production Designer/Costume Designer:* Patricia Norris. *Director of Photography:* Peter Deming. *Produced by:* Tom Steinberg, Mary Sweeney. *Written by:* David Lynch, Barry Gifford. *Directed by:* David Lynch. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 129 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A jealous saxophonist, Fred Madison (Pullman), begins to experience strange nightmares about his wife, Renee (Arquette), even as he grows increasingly suspicious that she is having an affair. Meanwhile, someone begins sending videotapes, ones sequentially detailing a home invasion of Fred's house as he and his wife sleep. But the police turn up nothing. When Renee is discovered dead, Fred is arrested for the murder, but something strange occurs. In his jail cell, a different man seems to take his place, Peter (Getty), a young man associated with gangster Dick Laurent (Loggia). Laurent's girlfriend is Alice (Arquette), a dead ringer for Renee.

COMMENTARY: A restless spirit of madness seems to haunt Fred Madison's dreams in *Lost Highway*, a highly disturbing and extremely surreal horror film from director David Lynch.

That specter takes the form of pasty-faced Robert Blake, and in the film's most unsettling, most dream-like sequence, he encounters protagonist Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) at a party. Smiling, diminutive and weird, this Loki-like character approaches Fred Madison— *as if straight out of his subconscious*— and informs the saxophonist that he, the Mystery Man, is at his house right now, killing his wife.

Of course, a person can't be in two places at the same time but the Mystery Man urges Fred to call his own house to confirm his unusual and disturbing story.

Fred does so, and at his house, the Mystery Man answers the phone. "I told you I was here," he says.

This is the unmistakable dream sense of David Lynch, and of *Lost Highway*, and it is bizarre and disturbing in a way not immediately apparent, in a way that only our reptilian brain might recognize. Some might call even call it antisense, or, uncharitably, nonsense.

What is *Lost Highway* about? Where director David Lynch is concerned, that's probably the wrong question to ask. His movies aren't about narratives in any conventional sense: they are about dwelling inside a mood, or inside an instant of time elongated to two hours. The mood in -habited by *Lost Highway*, pretty clearly, is madness.

Those associated with the film have reported that *Lost Highway* is a sort of free-association meditation on the O.J. Simpson trial mid-decade, and it's not hard to discern the connection, once informed that's the intent. Pullman plays a public figure (a musician, not a sports hero), and he becomes involved in the murder of his beautiful blonde wife.

The opening shot, a point-of-view from the dashboard of a car rocketing down a lonely highway by night, the pavement illuminated only by headlights, even recalls, just a little bit, O.J.'s famous freeway race in the white bronco.

Like O.J., Madison also proclaims his innocence, but he's not necessarily a reliable witness. For one thing, he doesn't like the prying eye of the video camera. "I like to remember things my own way," he complains, "not necessarily the way they happened."

That's a good thing in this case because there's no way to literally explain how things come to happen in *Lost Highway*, how Madison is "replaced" by Peter Dayton in that jail cell, and the story follows him for a while, particularly his rescue of Renee's doppelganger, Alice (also Arquette), who seems to be involved in sexual slavery.

In the end, *Lost Highway* winds back to Madison at his house, at the beginning of the movie once more. A stranger (to Madison) comes to his door and informs him that "Dick Laurent is dead." At least this time around, we know who Dick Laurent is—but this isn't exactly clear narrative closure.

The appreciation of David Lynch's work comes out of interpreting his symbols and reading carefully his imagery. In this case, what it

feels like Lynch is actually portraying is the madness of a jealous man who is destined to kill his wife. That madness is manifested as the Mystery Man, whose inhuman pale face appears superimposed over Arquette during one nightmare sequence.

Certainly, it is clear that Madison is rageful and jealous, and even the production design of his house seems to indicate this is so. It's a lurid, dark place with terracotta walls ... forbidding and frightening.

In an early scene, sex between Fred and the gorgeous Renee also goes badly. After some slowmotion photography and the exaggerated sounds of panting, Fred loses his erection, and Renee doesn't appear thrilled. Again, the impression is of a troubled marriage, of looming, impulsive rage, ready to be sated.

Jealousy and rage are embodied by another scene as well, during which Fred calls Renee on a red telephone, bathed in hellish light. She's not home, and his conviction that she is cheating on him grows. His whole world seems to visualize the "red" streak of jealousy.

Perhaps then, *Lost Highway* concerns a dark roadway of the mind, Madison's slippage into madness leading up to the death of his wife. If we're viewing all this from the "interior" of Madison's mind—a distinct possibility—then he "becomes" Peter to escape his sense of guilt.

In 2001, David Lynch directed *Mulholland Drive*, another film that adopts the same kind of character/time switch mid-way through the proceedings, but in that film it's almost easier to grasp what is being expressed. That film involves the artifice and lies of Hollywood, and the identity switcheroo fits into the template of actors "lying" for a living and a world where illusion and reality meet.

The switch in *Lost Highway* is far more opaque, and in many ways, far more sinister than what appears in *Mulholland Drive*. It suggests the madness of personal identity and more importantly personal orientation (a grasp of time and space) shattered.

Like many horror films of the 1990s, *Lost Highway* is unconventional. It doesn't build its foundation on easy scares or ideas, but assembles a phantasm of that familiar Lynch dream-sense. A dark, seedy atmosphere underlies the film, and some moments are as diabolical and unnerving as anything ever put to celluloid.

Or as one character puts it, embodying Lynch's familiar, oddball sense of humor: "this is some spooky shit we got here."

The Lost World: Jurassic Park 2 * * *

Critical Reception

"Japanese tourists screaming as they run from the giant dinosaur. Best scene in the movie. That's sad. Bringing the dinosaurs to San Diego for the last third of the film all but announced they couldn't really agree on a storyline, even after discarding most of Michael Crichton's novel. Having Jeff Goldblum and company surviving a camper falling off a muddy cliff is exciting, but it's all kind of empty feeling, like a meal of candy—it doesn't make you feel particularly full at the end."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jeff Goldblum (Ian Malcolm); Julianne Moore (Sarah Harding); Vince Vaughn (Nick Van Owen); Peter Postlethwaite (Roland Tembo); Arliss Howard (Peter Ludlow); Vanessa Lee Chester (Kelly); Richard Attenborough (Hammond), Peter Stormare (Dieter); Harvey Jason (Ajay); Richard Schiff (Eddie Carr); Joseph Mazzello (Tim); Ariana Richards (Lex); Thomas Rosales (Carter); Camilla Beller (Cathy Bowman); Cyd Strittmatter (Mrs. Bowman); Ian Abercrombie (Butler); Bernard Shaw (Himself); David Koepp (Unlucky Bastard).

CREW: Universal Pictures presents an Amblin Entertainment Production. *Music:* John Williams. *Full-Motion Dinosaurs and special visual effects:* ILM. *Live Action Dinosaurs designed and created by:* Stan Winston. *Production Designer:* Rick Carter. *Director of Photography:* Janusz Kaminski. *Film Editor:* Michael Kahn. *Based on the novel The Lost World by:* Michael Crichton. *Written by:* David Koepp. *Produced by:* Gerald R. Molen, Colin Wilson. *Executive Producer:* Kathleen Kennedy. *Directed by:* Steven Spielberg. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 129 minutes.

INCANTATION: "Somewhere on this island is the greatest predator there ever lived. The second greatest predator must take him down."—Roland Tembo (Pete Postlethwaite), discusses his quest to beat the T-Rex in *The Lost World*

SYNOPSIS: Old man Hammond (Attenborough) sends a team, including Ian Malcolm (Goldblum), paleontologist Sarah Harding (Moore), tech-guy Eddie (Schiff) and videographer Nick Van Owen (Vaughn) to document the wild dinosaur life at "Site B," a sister island to Isla Nubar. At almost the same time, Hammond's avaricious

nephew, Ludlow (Howard), arrives on the island with a team of hunters to capture as many dinosaurs as possible and bring them back to civilization. The dinosaurs have other plans, however, but at least two dinosaurs, a mom and baby T-Rex, return to San Francisco and wreak havoc.

COMMENTARY: A sequel to 1993's blockbuster *Jurassic Park* was probably not really necessary, since one movie got the job done well, and told the story of man's quest to become God by re-creating dinosaurs. But this was the nineties, and sometimes it seems like every horror movie had a sequel.

Hell, *Leprechaun* had three in the 1990s.

To its credit, *The Lost World: Jurassic Park 2* plays more like a legitimate continuation of the *Jurassic Park* narrative than blatant cash grab. In large part, this is because Steven Spielberg returned to direct the film. The sequel's story, concerning a greedy company, InGen, seeking again to exploit the island of dinosaurs, is worthy enough of screen time, but *The Lost World* gains visceral impact primarily because of Spielberg's technical legerdemain. The characters may be strictly off-the-shelf clichés, but the set-pieces of *The Lost World* are grueling, edge-of-your-seat affairs, with Spielberg proving that, in a pinch, he has the technical chops to create momentum even without aid of a particularly strong script.

In terms of sequels, *The Lost World* features more gadgetry, more guns, more victims and more dino action than its predecessor, so there are no complaints there. Even better, Spielberg seems in a nastier mood than usual, and dispenses with his characteristic sense of sentimentality, which can border on schmaltz.

The film's opening sequence depicts a gang of diminutive dinosaurs first surrounding and then attacking a cute-as-a-button little girl. Given Spielberg's long-reported reputation as a "kid" himself, this is meaningful. Later, one of the film's most likeable and goofy heroes, Eddie (Schiff), gets viciously ripped apart on-screen by two angry T-Rexes. The overall feeling then, is that this sequel means business, and again, no complaints here.

Perhaps realizing that he can't achieve the sense of wonder over dinosaurs a second time, Spielberg forges a number of dazzling, escalating set pieces in *The Lost World*. The first involves a T-Rex mommy who, in attempting to get back her baby from the film's protagonist, pushes one high-tech trailer over a high precipice (with stormy seas below), leaving another sliding on muddy ground. The

characters played by Goldblum, Vaughn and Moore are inside the dangling trailer, and in one bracing moment, Moore's character, Sarah, falls the length of the vertical compartment into a large glass window. She falls towards Spielberg's camera so that, in clear view, the audience can see her weight starting to have an effect on the portal. Tiny cracks begin to dot the window. The cracks spread and multiply, line by line, as Ian and Nick try to rescue her before the window cracks entirely, and she plummets to her doom.

Spielberg throws literally everything but the kitchen sink at this scene. A falling satellite phone shatters the glass, and Sarah falls further, but catches onto the strap of her "lucky" backpack just in time. Meanwhile, we cut to doomed Eddie, using a car and winch to pull the hanging trailer back up over the cliff-side. Two T-Rexes show up...

Through cross-cutting, fast cuts, and an unmatched sense of visual placement and geography, Spielberg turns what could be a short moment into an extended dance with terror, as man grapples with nature (rain), with technology (cars, winches, tranquilizer guns), plus monsters (the angry dinosaurs). This scene is the last word in cliffhangers, and you get the feeling that Spielberg is having unfettered fun making the audience squirm.

Another dinosaur attack is staged with equal aplomb. A line of soldiers crosses through a field of high grass, and Spielberg's camera cuts to a high angle as the pack hunters, velociraptors, close in. We don't see the dinosaurs themselves, at least not at first. We just see moving lines in the grass, lines that the soldiers themselves can't see. Then—leaping lizards—the velociraptors set upon the unsuspecting humans.

Another spectacular set-piece involves the dinosaur safari, and this time, the dinosaurs are the prey, as man once more attempts to play God. This lengthy sequence finds a group of safari-out-fitted vehicles capturing the dinosaurs in an animal stampede, and it blends realistic CGI, roaring live-action stunts, and incredible velocity into a perfect montage of excitement and action.

Unlike *Jurassic Park*, the sequel—perhaps in keeping with the attitude of the late 1990s—seems concerned with movie references and allusions. The title harks back to Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, another dinosaur adventure which was made into a film in 1925 and 1960. The ship that carries the T-Rex baby back to San Francisco in the film's last act is named *Venture* after the vessel in the original *King Kong* (1993). And, of course, the T-Rex rampage through a modern city (debatably the film's biggest misstep) harks back to *Godzilla*, especially during a moment in which the predator sets his sights on

several Japanese tourists. Even the plot device of a Mother dinosaur searching for her young mirrors the classic *Gorgo* (1961).

The original *Jurassic Park* did not have a self-aware sense of humor, except in regards to its own titanic merchandising and logo, and again, it bespeaks of the film's under-the-surface sense of amusement about itself. This is a good old-fashioned dinosaur rampage movie.

That doesn't mean the film lacks a point. Certainly, *The Lost World* involves the metaphor of the developed world versus the undeveloped world. Former industrialist, now naturalist John Hammonds (Attenborough again), argues for the ethical treatment of the dinosaurs, and for a preserve on Isla Sorna where they can live out their lives, undisturbed. Big business, of course, sees the dinosaurs as a cash cow, an attraction that can get InGen back in the black.

The film's last shot is a pure fairy tale, however. Now quarantined from the developed world, Isla Sorna's dinosaurs literally seem to form a happy family. In one shot (in one frame, indeed), carnivores and vegetarians mill about without conflict. And a gorgeous pterodactyl alights on a nearby branch. It's beautiful, but let's face it ... the dinosaurs would either be attacking each other or steering clear of one another. The last shot, of the "preserved" dinosaurs as a big happy family is Steven Spielberg back in sentimental mode.

Technically astounding, with characters constantly "in the company of death," *The Lost World* is an above-average sequel to a great film, but it seriously wears out its welcome in the final act. Landing a T-Rex in San Francisco sounds promising, but somehow the dinosaur just seems diminished and small in the technological world of man, losing much of its grandeur and power.

In some ways, *The Lost World* would have worked better had it simply ended with a rescue from the island, and after the dramatic high-point of a velociraptor assault on a dilapidated communications center. Instead, the film goes on for another half-hour, but it seems entirely like an afterthought, especially since one character, Nick, disappears entirely from the film and is not seen again. Wouldn't he help Ian and Sarah in San Francisco too?

Critical Reception

"Guillermo Del Toro has stated that he's equally comfortable making big-budget studio pictures and smaller, personal films, and with *Pan's Labyrinth* he's effectively fused both. *Mimic* is unmistakably studio product, a fairly standard horror/ sci-fi hybrid, and yet Del Toro never lets it completely descend into the generic. The script is well above average for its type, the creature designs clever and memorable, and the always impressive Mira Sorvino is an appealing lead."—John Bowen, *Rue Morgue*

"Does humanity reside at the top of the food chain by divine design, evolutionary chance, or both? Regardless of the answer one chooses to this question, *Mimic* provides an interesting take on evolutionary development and survival of the fittest wherein humanity's survival is threatened by one of the most ancient and prevalent forms of life on earth, that of insects. In what might have been a less than frightening, or even believable horror film about bugs, in the hands of director Guillermo Del Toro *Mimic* offers an interesting and atmospheric piece that capitalizes upon much of the action which takes place in New York's older, abandoned subway system. When this scenario connected to a basic human fear of insects, particularly large flesh eating ones, the makings for a good horror film comes together. *Mimic* is an entertaining and neglected piece of Del Toro horror cinema."—John W. Morehead, *TheoFantastique*

"An intriguing concept played out using some talented actors, including Oscar winners Mira Sorvino and F. Murray Abraham. This early work from the visionary director Guillermo Del Toro doesn't get the credit it deserves. Although a shadow of his later stuff, it still has much to recommend it."—Brian Solomon, *Vaultof Horror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Mira Sorvino (Dr. Susan Tyler); Jeremy Northam (Peter Mann); Josh Brolin (Josh); Giancarlo Giannini (Manny); Charles S. Dutton (Leonard); F. Murray Abraham (Dr. Gates); Alex Koromzay (Remy); Alexander Goodwin (Chuy); James Costa (Ricky); Jaron Barnwell (Davis); Norman Reedus (Jeremy); Pak-K Wong Ho (Preacher).

CREW: Dimension Films presents a film by Guillermo Del Toro. *Casting:* Billy Hopkins, Suzanne Smith, Kerry Barden. *Creature Design:* Rob Bottin, Tyruben Ellingson. *Creatures Created by:* Rick Lazzarini.

Music by: Marco Beltrami. *Film Editor:* Patrick Lussier. *Production Designer:* Carol Spier. *Director of Photography:* Dan Laustsen. *Executive Producer:* Michael Phillips. *Produced by:* Bob Weinstein, B.J. Rack, Ole Bornedal. *Based on the short story "Mimic" by:* Donald A. Wollheim. *Screen story by:* Matthew Robbins, Guillermo Del Toro. *Directed by:* Guillermo Del Toro. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 105 minutes.

INCANTATION: "So, you think your little Frankenstein has gotten the better of you?"—Dr. Gates (F. Murray Abraham) makes an on-the-nose assessment in *Mimic*

SYNOPSIS: A fatal outbreak of Strickler's disease in Manhattan threatens a generation of American children until Dr. Susan Tyler (Sorvino) destroys the carrier of the disease, the common cockroach, by engineering a predator called the Judas Bug. Three years later, the disease is a memory, but the Judas Bugs—which were supposed to self-terminate after one generation—have evolved. This intelligent, human-sized variant of the Judas Bug stakes out territory under the Big Apple's subways and murders anyone who trespasses. Susan and her fiancé, Peter (Northam), along with a detective, Josh (Brolin), and a port authority officer, Leonard (Dutton), go down underground to exterminate the bugs, unaware that they are breeding like crazy.

COMMENTARY: Much like *Species* in 1995, Guillermo Del Toro's *Mimic* is undeniably a product of the mainstream Hollywood machine. But also like that effort, it is a machine that works at peak performance and, more than that, is a damned scary movie ... even if it lacks some of the individual personality of other Del Toro efforts.

Mimic is a science run amok story involving a dedicated doctor, Susan Tyler (Mira Sorvino), who creates life in the form of the Judas Bug, to stop a deadly disease and save the children of New York. The accident has unintended consequences, however, when the Franken-bugs survive, *Jurassic Park*-style.

Mimic even adopts a variation of the Spielberg movie's line about nature finding a way. Only here it is spoken as "evolution has a way of keeping things alive," which, if you think about it, is a lot less elegant. Still, the movie creatively balances the fact that Susan herself has been unable to produce a biological offspring but has nonetheless created a whole new species ... of monster.



Dr. Susan Tyler (Mira Sorvino) plans an unusual cure for Strickler's Disease in Guillermo Del Toro's *Mimic* (1997).

Del Toro's cinematic effort is filled with dire warnings about tampering in God's domain, mostly voiced by F. Murray Abraham's disapproving Dr. Gates. His warnings prove well-founded, since the movie concerns life-sized bugs populating the sewers beneath the Big Apple. But even though these monsters are a threat to human dominance on Earth—"they can imitate us, infiltrate us and breed a legion before anyone would notice," one character warns—the film actually treats the walking bugs (who oddly resemble priests, especially in a scene set in a dilapidated church) with a modicum of sympathy.

For example, Susan is depicted, early in the film, creating the Judas Bugs to save the young of her species who are succumbing to Strickler's. The bugs themselves kill mostly when their young are imperiled too. They take out Josh (Josh Brolin) after he has discovered their egg chambers, for example. They kill two scavenging boys, similarly, after the boys attempt to gather specimens of the Judas Bugs for Susan. Perhaps, not that much really separates this species. They "mimic" our human love for our young to a high degree.

Mimic reaches its pinnacle of terror during a scene set on a subterranean subway when the heroes become trapped in a car, the

giant bugs surrounding it. Susan and company resort to wiping alien slime on themselves so the insects won't recognize their human blood.

"Try not to sweat," snaps Susan, "they sense chemical changes." Then, Peter—rubbed down in bug grue—must go out of the train and—in direct sight of the bugs—perform a task to save the others. The scene culminates with Leonard's (Charles Dutton) sacrifice when he realizes he's not going to stop bleeding, and that the bugs will be drawn to him no matter what.

Mimic is a big action movie with impressive sets and huge set-pieces. The first time an evolved Judas appears, and it sweeps a human off her feet on a subway station, remains an indelible image of 1990s horror cinema, a scarifying visual of man's creation grown-up and malevolent. Del Toro is a brilliant visual director, and he aces his work here. During the Strickler's scene interlude, he cuts to empty playgrounds, snow-covered vistas and overcrowded hospitals with children suffering and dying within. Each ribbon seen in this section represents a dead child. There are a lot of ribbons.



Josh (Josh Brolin) is grabbed by a giant, sentient bug in *Mimic* (1997).

Later, Del Toro stages good isolating shots in darkness, looking up towards street level for illumination. In some instances, the camera spots people walking by unaware above, over street grates. Staged from this underneath angle, it's a view of being trapped in Hell. The surface world seems like another reality entirely.

Mimic ends with mock heroics so common to the genre in the 1990s. Regular folk leap over railroad tracks past oncoming trains, survive huge conflagrations and gas explosions, and other implausibilities. A viewer may either accept such unbelievable scenarios as part and parcel of nineties cinema and cast them aside to enjoy the special effects, the pacing, the exquisite camera work and production design. Or they can curse the darkness.

In a decade of real stinkers like *Leprechaun*, I choose the former. *Mimic* has its pleasures and moves at times, with authentic sinister grace.

***Night Flier* * * ***

Critical Reception

"My cynicism about Stephen King adaptations was probably at its peak on the fateful night I begrudgingly shoved this one into the VCR at the insistence of *Rue Morgue* magazine publisher Rodrigo Gudino. Rod's rarely ever steered me wrong, and to say that *The Night Flier* was a pleasant shock would be a gross understatement. The comic-bookish feel of the first and second acts makes the hair-raising and surreal finale a devastating sucker punch. Miguel Ferrer is at his bile-spitting best here (perhaps channeling his similarly cantankerous *Twin Peaks* character), and Julie Entwistle (who could easily be mistaken for Phoebe Cates circa *Drop Dead Fred*) makes a credible transition from wide-eyed innocent to an equally cynical foil for Ferrer."—John Bowen, *Rue Morgue*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Miguel Ferrer (Richard Dees); Julie Entwistle (Katherine "Jimmy Olsen" Blair); Dan Monahan (Merton Morrison); Michael H. Moss (Dwight Renfield); John Benes (Ezra Hannon); Beverly Skinner (Selida McCamon); Rob Wilds (Buck Kendall); Richard Olsen (Claire Bowie); Elizabeth McCormick (Ellen Sarch); J.R. Rodriguez (Terminal Cop #1); Bob Casey (Terminal Cop #2); Ashton Stewart (Nate Wilson); William Neely (Ray Sarch); Windy Wenderlich (Henry Gates); Kristen Leigh (Dottie Walsh); Matthew Johnson (Caretaker).

CREW: New Amsterdam Entertainment Inc. in association with Stardust Intl. and Medusa Film SPA present a Richard P. Rubinstein

Production, a Mark Pavia Film. *Casting*: Leonard Finger, Briane Keane. *Costume Designer*: Pauline White. *Production Designer*: Burton Rencher. *Film Editor*: Elizabeth Schwartz. *Special Effects*: KNB EFX Group, Inc. *Director of Photography*: David Connell. *Co-Producer*: Alfredo Cuomo. *Executive Producer*: David Kappes. *Based on a story by*: Stephen King. *Written by*: Mark Pavia, Jack O'Donnell. *Produced by*: Richard P. Rubinstein, Mitchell Galin. *Directed by*: Mark Pavia. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 97 minutes

INCANTATION: "Never believe what you publish, and never publish what you believe."— Tabloid reporter Richard Dees' philosophy of life, from *Night Flier*

SYNOPSIS: *Inside View's* top reporter, the cynical Richard Dees (Ferrer), investigates the story of a vampire named Dwight Renfield (Moss) who haunts isolated airport landing fields. Dees competes with a fresh young reporter, Katherine (Entwistle), for the byline, becoming drawn deeper and deeper into the tale of the vampire and his victims. After locking up his competitor in a closet, Dees heads to an airport in Wilmington where he meets the vampire and his destiny.

COMMENTARY: *The Night Flier*, from director Mark Pavia, is a surprisingly powerful adaptation of the Stephen King story about a shadowy vampire haunting rural airports. At the center of the film is Miguel Ferrer, playing an unscrupulous tabloid journalist, a man who puts his reporting over the human aspects and costs of the story.

An indictment of media in the 1990s and the sensational coverage of stories like the O.J. Simpson trial, Amy Fisher, Susan Smith or Richard Jewell, *The Night Flier* focuses on the ways that fame-seeking reporter Dees (Ferrer) and a monster (a vampire) form a symbiotic bond (a facet also informing Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*). As the vampire tells Ferrer, they are "brothers in blood," meaning that they both thrive on spilled blood. The vampire needs it for physical sustenance; Ferrer needs blood to sell papers.

The Night Flier also focuses on the intense journalistic competition between Dees and a cub reporter named Katherine whom he derisively calls "Jimmy Olsen." At one point, Dees pretends to ally himself with Katherine, but then he locks her in a hotel room closet so he can get the story first.

The point of debate here is simple: journalists are supposed to

remain objective and yet, in the quest for more readers and higher ratings, they often cross moral and ethical lines to be the first "reporter" on the scene. For Dees, that really back-fires, and he is ultimately framed for the crimes of the vampire.

Dees also lives by a set of rules of professional conduct, one of which involves not letting the stories he covers get to him emotionally. We see these rules in practice, and it's not impressive. For instance, when he interviews a mourning hairdresser over the death of a client she liked, he snaps a picture in her sad face, flash bulb and all, and it's utterly thoughtless.

At film's conclusion, the vampire similarly blinds Dees with a flash of sorts. He shows Dees a "vision of Hell," making the callous, competitive reporter understand terror on a personal level, the so-called human dimensions of the story he has neglected to cover. Naturally, he doesn't like it when the shoe is on the other foot.

Dee's competitor, Katherine, may be a rookie reporter, but she learns the lesson Dees didn't : that personal tragedy isn't always for sharing with the world and that being first isn't always best.

Although *Night Flier* is very gory, most of the gore is seen after the fact, in visuals of messy, blood-stained crime scenes. As for the vampire, he is seen mostly in silhouette and shadow, or from a distance. This restrained approach maintains the horror and menace of the character throughout the drama. When he warns Dees not to follow him anymore or the vampire will "swallow him whole," it feels like much more than an idle threat.

Cynical, sharply-written, well-performed and occasionally downright scary, *The Night Flier* is a good commentary on tabloid journalism in the 1990s, and a better-than-average adaptation of Stephen King source material.

***Poison Ivy: The New Seduction* * * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jaime Pressley (Violet); Michael Des Barres (Ivan Greer); Megan Edwards (Joy Greer); Greg Vaughan (Michael); Susan Tyrell (Mrs. B.); Gregory Vignolle (Alvaro); Michael McLafferty (Scott); Merete Van Kamp (Catherine); Tenaya Erich (Violet, Age 8); Athena Massey (Rebecca); Trishalee Hardy (Joy, Age 9); Sabrina Christie (Ivy, Age 9); Shanna Moakler (Jaimie).

CREW: A Cinetel Pictures production in association with MG Entertainment. *Casting:* Heidi Klein, Robin Klein. *Costume Designer:* Kristen Anacker. *Production Designer:* Elizabeth A. Scott. *Music:* Reg Powell. *Film Editor:* John Rosenberg. *Director of Photography:* Feliks Parnell. *Executive Producer:* Melissa Godard, Peter Morgan, Vanessa Norris, Paul Federbush. *Written by:* Karen Kelly. *Produced by:* Catherine Knell. *Directed by:* Kurt Voss. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Ivy's psychotic sister, Violet (Pressley), returns to the house where she grew up and where her mother was sexually involved with the man of the house, Ivan Greer (Des Barres). Violet befriends Ivan's now-adult daughter, Joy (Edwards), but then almost immediately sets about dismantling her life: stealing her boyfriend Michael (Vaughan), seducing her father, and even destroying her opportunity to win a tennis match.

COMMENTARY: *The New Seduction* is the sleaziest and raunchiest of the *Poison Ivy* films, and on those terms, this return to the interloper formula is a lot of wicked fun. A young Jaime Pressley steps in to the lead role, playing the sister of Drew Barrymore's character in the original.

But this "Violet" doesn't wilt ... she's a brazen family breaker and dismantles the Greer family with ease. In keeping with the class-warfare subtext of these films, the only person who recognizes the white-trash Violet as a threat is a housekeeper, Susan Tyrell's suspicious Mrs. B.

After the navel-gazing *Poison Ivy: Lilly* (1996), the franchise returns to its horror roots here, and with something approximating glee too. In short order, Violet seduces Michael, the boyfriend whom Joy has been denying sex because she's too uptight. There's some funny dialogue in this seduction scene too. Violet claims she works at Denny's. Michael says he's never eaten there. Violet then asks him if he wants to. Then she gets down on her knees and performs fellatio on the guy. He hates himself for betraying Joy, but then Violet tricks him again. She gets him strung out on cocaine and then he has sex with her again.

Later, it's all too easy to arrange Michael's death by overdose. Scratch out one boyfriend. Then Violet goes after Dad. She sabotages his upcoming date and then, when he's alone, seduces him. As the sex scene plays out, the film none-too-subtly cuts from the couple together

to a garden sprinkler spurting water.

The motive for all this sex and violence is, naturally, revenge. Violet feels that her family (especially her mom) was mistreated by the Greens and now she makes their lives hell. The final confrontation, with Violet setting up a tea party to play with "Joy," is straight out of the slasher genre (see: *Happy Birthday to Me* [1981]).

Not deep by any means, *The New Seduction* is trashy and lurid. Without any artistic pretensions whatsoever, it also gets right to the heart of the interloper subgenre. Here, Violet finds it all too easy to use people's weaknesses against them in a troubled family unit. Michael's desire for sex and problem with drugs do him in. Joy's fear of intimacy causes her to lose Michael in the first place. And Ivan, of course, shatters family boundaries by sleeping with his daughter's friend. Before movie's end, Violet also follows in Ivy's footsteps by adorning the dead matriarch's robe.

In these movies, that's a sign of invasion, and a declaration of war.

Poison Ivy: The New Seduction is definitely of prurient interest, and Jaime Pressley plays Violet to the hilt, making her one of the nineties sexiest—and trashiest—interlopers.

The Relic * *

Critical Reception

"You haven't seen anything until you've witnessed Penelope Ann Miller, who has yet to find a role that fits, conducting genetic research in an ever-chic little black dress. Gore seekers need only to know the body count is high and the scares are cheap...."—Susan Wloszczyna, *USA Today*, "Relic: A Creaky Creature Feature. Body Count Is High but Thrills Are Few," January 10, 1997, page D4

Cast and Crew

CAST: Penelope Ann Miller (Dr. Margo Green); Tom Sizemore (Lt. Vincent DiAgosta); Linda Hunt (Dr. Ann Cuthbert); James Whitmore (Dr. Albert Frock); Clayton Rohner (Hollingsworth); Chi Muo Lo (Greg Lee); James Ryan (Parkinson); Robert Lesser (Major Owen); Diane Robin (Mayor's Wife); Lewis Van Berger (John

Whitney); Constance Towers (Mrs. Blaisdale); Francis X. Mc-Carthy (Mrs. Blaisdale); Audra Lindley (Dr. Zwiezic); John Kapelos (McNally); Tico Wells (Bailey); Mike Bacarella (Bradley); John DiSanti (Wootton); David Proval (Eugene).

CREW: Paramount Pictures Presents in association with Cloud Nine Production, a Pacific-Western Production of a Pete Hyams film. *Casting:* Penny Perry. *Music Composed and conducted by:* John Debney. *Creature Effects:* Stan Winston. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* Gregory McMurry. *Film Editor:* Steven Kemper. *Production Design:* Philip Harrison. *Director of Photography:* Peter Hyams. *Executive Producers:* Gary Levinsohn, Mark Gordon. *Based upon the novel by:* Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child. *Produced by:* Gale Ann Hurd. *Produced by:* Sam Mercer. *Screenplay by:* Amy Jones, John Raffo, Rick Jaffa, Amanda Silver. *Directed by:* Peter Hyams. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 110 minutes.

INCANTATION: "Something's wrong. This brain is light, even for a man."—Dr. Zwiezic (Lindley) quips during an autopsy in *The Relic*

SYNOPSIS: A set of mysterious crates from Brazil, sent by the staff anthropologist John Whitney (Van Berger), arrives at the National Museum of Chicago. Before long, a strange monster lurks in the dark corners and corridors of the facility, brutally murdering security men and subsequently devouring the pituitary gland of each victim. Instead of canceling a gala celebrating a new museum exhibition called Superstition, hard-boiled homicide detective DiAgosta (Sizemore) hopes to snare the culprit, whom he presumes to be a serial killer worse than Jeffrey Dahmer. Meanwhile, evolutionary biologist Margo Green (Miller) begins to understand the monster's real nature with the help of a wise old friend, Dr. Frock (Whitmore).

COMMENTARY: James Whitmore survived the giant ants of *Them!* (1954) but couldn't make it through the horrors of *The Relic*.

Viewers may sympathize with the veteran actor, since it's pretty hard to endure this beast. What should have been a triumphant monster movie—one that would have done for the Age of Genetic Science the same thing *Them!* did for the Atomic Age—is instead a hard slog. For one thing, *The Relic* is drastically and maddeningly under lit, so much so that it's virtually impossible to see the monster, what the monster's doing, or whom he is doing it too.

If that doesn't drive the viewer to distraction, the film's risible character quirks will. Tom Sizemore plays a clichéd cop who three times makes a joke about his terrible divorce and the fact that his ex-wife won custody of the dog. The joke wasn't funny the first time.

If that running gag isn't stupid enough for you, Sizemore spends half the film discussing his superstitions: his lucky bullet, or the fact that he won't step across corpses. The point is to compare and contrast "superstition" (the theme of the museum extravaganza) with "science" but the connection is ham-handed.

The Relic also has the bad manners to crib concepts and even shots from other, better monster movies. From *Jaws*, the film acquires "The Beaches Stay Open" subplot. If you remember the Spielberg film, you'll recall how greedy local businessmen wanted the beaches of Amity to stay open despite the presence of a great white shark in nearby waters. Here, unscrupulous museum officials think the "Superstition" gala should go on, despite a rash of murders in the museum building.

And you might recall in *Alien*³ how the frightening xenomorph scurried across the floor in one trademark scene and invaded Ripley's personal space. It even "tasted" her, extending its silver inner jaw to her face as she gasped and grimaced. That David Fincher shot gets repurposed for *The Relic* too, as the monster licks Margo with a big, wet tongue.

Monster movies like *The Relic* succeed or fail based on their ability, in part, to seem coherent. The monster's abilities must be consistent, and you can't cheat the small stuff just to generate scares. Unfortunately, *The Relic* fails in that regard. During one critical span in the film, the monster appears to be at opposite ends of the giant museum simultaneously. It's down in the sewers first, killing off three would-be rescuers, and, seconds later, it's all the way down at the far end of the facility, in the basement, to kill off unlucky Dr. Frock.

Filled with interminable sequences set entirely in darkness (so you can't even tell which characters you are losing), *The Relic* can't even offer a really elegant monster, like the Alien, or Sil from *Species*. Instead, this underwhelming Stan Winston creation is a goofy amalgamation of leaping lizard and tiger, replete with stylish Mohawk.

If you're willing to sit through the rest of the film, *The Relic* does feature one thoroughly outstanding action set-piece. The gala starts at the fifty-five minute point, and before long, the giant monster dispatches a rescue team that enters the museum through the roof. The beast starts kicking ass and taking names, not to mention brains,

and for a brief spell, the film is gory good fun.

All the best monster movies are smart ones and pit clever beasts against clever humans to see who deserves to be at the top of the food chain. In this film, Margo Green is a bit of a dullard. She doesn't start putting things together till late in the proceedings. Then, she randomly pipes up with one of the worst lines in monster movie history. Something along the lines of "hey, remember when they mentioned something about the human hypothalamus?"

Yeah I do remember that. What took you so long, Dr. Green?

Scream 2 * * * .

Critical Reception

"*Scream 2* doesn't suck. That's the ultimate compliment ... Wes Craven and writer Kevin Williamson have sharpened the focus along with their killer's knives. They've smartly allowed their know-it-all horror yarn to grow up.... [T]he satire is more sophisticated, the slayings more byzantine."—Susan Wloszczyna, *USA Today*, "*Scream 2* Takes a Stab at Sophistication," page 1D

"The script, which is ultra sharp except for some preachy asides about what one character describes as 'all the violence-in-cinema issues,' will keep the audience guessing about the identity of the killer until the end."—Carol Buckland, *CNN*, "*Scream 2*: Horror's Hippest Hoot," December 25, 1997

"Williamson cooked up another good script, filled with irony and shocks, and though it doesn't feel as fresh as the first time, this is still a highly entertaining flick."—*Montreal film Journal*, "*Scream 2*," <http://www.montrealfilmjournal.com/review.asp?R=40000485>

Cast and Crew

CAST: Neve Campbell (Sidney Prescott); Jamie Kennedy (Randy); David Arquette (Deputy Dewey); Courteney Cox (Gale Weathers); Liev Schreiber (Cotton Weary); Sarah Michelle Gellar (CiCi Cooper); Laurie Metcalf (Debbie Salt); Jerry O'Connell (Derek); Joshua Jackson (Film Class Guy); Jada Pinkett (Maureen Evans); Tori Spelling (Herself); Elise Neal (Hallie); Omar Epps (Phil Stevens); Duane Martin (Joel); Timothy Olyphant (Mickey); David Warner (Gus); Heather Graham

(Stab Casey Becker).

CREW: Dimension Films presents a Konrad Pictures Production in association with Craven/ Maddalena Film, a Film by Wes Craven. *Casting:* Lisa Beach. *Costume Designer:* Kathleen De Toro. *Music:* Marco Beltrami. *Production Designer:* Bob Ziembicki. *Film Editor:* Patrick Lussier. *Director of Photography:* Peter Deming. *Written by:* Kevin Williamson. *Produced by:* Marianne Maddalena. *Executive Producers:* Bob and Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Williamson. *Directed by:* Wes Craven. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 122 minutes.

INCANTATION: " *Stab 2?* Who'd want to do that? Sequels suck!"—Randy (Jamie Kennedy) comments on sequels in *Scream 2*

SYNOPSIS: At the same time that the movie *Stab*, based on the best seller by reporter Gale Weathers (Cox), premieres in theaters, a new rash of brutal slayings occur on the campus where Woodsboro Massacre survivors Sidney Prescott (Campbell) and Randy (Kennedy) are attending classes. Now a drama student, Sidney faces the return of Ghostface and begins to wonder if the killer could be her new boyfriend, Derek (O'Connell), or even Cotton Weary (Schreiber), the man she wrongly accused of her mother's murder. With co-eds dropping like flies, Sid, Dewey (Arquette) and Gail seek to unmask the killer.

COMMENTARY: *Scream 2* plays more like a direct continuation of *Scream* than a sequel produced and released a year later. Like its predecessor, *Scream 2* is crammed with movie and pop culture references, and it looks explicitly at the tabloid culture of the 1990s. But *Scream 2* also adopts a new and consistent leitmotif by setting the sequel in the world of art, the world of literature and drama. This is both an organizing principle and a way of establishing the legitimacy of horror films like *Scream*.

Nearly every death or near-death in *Scream 2* is staged in an arena related to the world of performing arts, and this means, according to the Craven picture, that *Scream* and *Scream 2* are not just cynical entertainments of the day but follow in a noble and age-old tradition of human storytelling. The explicit link in *Scream 2* between the film's settings and the world of "respectable" literature (namely Greek drama) cleverly deflects some of the moral criticism leveled at these films, what Williamson's script identifies as "violencein-cinema

issues."

Starting out with the first sequence, Jada Pinkett's character, Maureen, is murdered in a movie theater and her final act is to stagger onto a movie stage screening the fictional horror movie *Stab*, thus symbolically joining with the bloody act on-screen right behind her. Similarly, Randy is dispatched in a news van, with technical video equipment in evidence, and this is crucial too. In the *Scream* series, Randy has been the arbiter of the "rules" of making real life connections to conventions in entertainment. It is fitting then that he dies in a news van that incorporates basically the same service: reporting on the situation. Similarly, Dewey (Arquette) almost meets his doom in a sound studio (at a film school building).

Most importantly, perhaps, *Scream 2*'s final battle is vetted on stage at the school theatre, in front of a scenic backdrop from Greek drama. Sidney, who claims she knew that the terror would begin again someday, and who assays the role of Cassandra in the play—an unheeded seer—defeats her murderous opponents against the backdrop of stage lights and deadly props and stormy sound effects. The implication is that, as Shakespeare wrote, "all the world's a stage."

The decision to stage *Scream 2*'s most dynamic and important moments around props and symbols of the performing arts world is Wes Craven's latest post-modern, Pirandellian affectation.

As was the case in *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*, the audience is constantly reminded of literary history at the same that it witnesses a new adventure. With the inclusion of *Stab*, this notion of a film-within-a-film-within-a-film is reinforced and carried to an extreme level too. Sidney Prescott is not just Neve Campbell playing the role she made famous in *Scream*. She is also Cassandra and the fodder for Tori Spelling's thespian interpretation in *Stab*. Jada Pinkett is not just an actress playing Maureen, she is a character deploring the role of African Americans in the horror genre. When she is killed, she defeats her own argument (simultaneously starring in *Scream 2* and blending with the fictional action of *Stab* on screen).

Further heightening this meta-duality in *Scream 2* is the fact that almost every character/ actor boasts multiple identities in the film. Randy laments that he is played by an unknown in *Stab*, whereas Dewey is played by the well-known David Schwimmer of *Friends*. Gale Weathers is disturbed because a nude picture of her has been transmitted on the Internet, but she claims it was her head on Jennifer Aniston's body. Joel, the new cameraman, is upset by his real life casting in the role of Kenny ... the dead cameraman from *Scream*. Each character sees himself or herself on more than one level of reality.

Drama coach Gus (Warner) tells Sidney to use that knowledge of "the other" identity to defeat her fears. Sidney is Cassandra, so Gus tells her to use her real life pain to make Cassandra "real" and to be a fighter in reality.

In all, the connection to drama lurid and classical and sense of characters symbolizing more than one identity is a complicated trick to pull off, but it keeps *Scream 2* afloat. The film can never be accused of sucking blood from the original *Scream* because its own internal logic and leitmotif is different from it.

Another leitmotif in *Scream 2* involves, naturally, sequels. That's another idea carried throughout the film. In particular, the makers of *Scream 2* realize they have a tough job ahead of them: producing a film that is viewed as an equal to the original, wellreceived *Scream*. Accordingly, Williamson sets one scene in a film school classroom as students debate the merits of sequels and whether or not any of these cinematic follow-ups improve on the source material. The titles named as being better than their originals are *The Godfather 2* (1974), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), *Aliens* (1986), *Terminator 2* (1991) and, jokingly, *House II: The Second Story* (1987).

Randy, our guide to film lore, reminds the audience in *Scream 2* that *The Empire Strikes Back* is not merely a sequel, but a second movement in a larger trilogy. By inference, the audience is supposed to intuit the same thing about *Scream 2* ... that there is more to come. Unfortunately this doesn't quite work, as the film is not left with any hanging questions. The new Ghostface killers are unmasked and defeated. Sidney isn't trapped in carbonite, so-to-speak.

Randy also lists for us the rules of sequels. Rule #1 is "carnage candy." This means that sequels always feature a higher body count than the original. *Scream 2* clearly adheres to this rule, offering more carnage and more bloody candy, but mostly to its eventual detriment. There are far more characters to keep track of here, and they are given relatively scant screen time, making identification more difficult to come by. Sarah Michelle Gellar's character, CiCi, seems to appear in the film only to be killed. She actually seems like she's from another movie.

However, *Scream 2* is effective in its deepening of the characters from the first film. Gale, Dewey, Sidney, and Randy have all reached the status of beloved characters and it is to the film's credit that it repeatedly puts each of them in jeopardy. The most devastating moment in the movie is undoubtedly Randy's death. It is a shocking move. An unspoken rule of sequels, which Randy almost states, but thinks better of, is that all the survivors of the first film also survive

the second film, and thus suspense is lessened. Craven and Williamson overturn this rule and kill Randy fairly early on, showing how they don't just repeat conventions of the form, but put an unexpected spin on them.



Cotton Weary Cotton Weary (Liev Schreiber), a red herring, confronts Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell) over his desire to be interviewed by Diane Sawyer, in *Scream 2* (1997).

It's a great twist, killing Randy, but also, in the long run, a bad call. Randy is the unquestioned mouthpiece of the *Scream* saga, the character who offers viewers a road map to survival. Losing him is like losing the voice of the trilogy.

Perhaps the most interesting facet of *Scream 2* is the depiction of the killer, Mickey. He is given almost no substantial screen time in the movie, and developed as a character almost entirely through the selection of film references. It's Information Age shorthand: a character that isn't a character, but an amalgam of symbolic identities. For instance, Mickey's love for sequels is made obvious from his film class comments on *Aliens* and *T2*. His thesis is that some sequels are better than the original films because he is in fact the character orchestrating the killings here; in other words, he's behind the sequel, so of course he's in favor of the form.

Although undeniably more complicated than the first *Scream*, *Scream 2* gets the job done in large part because of Craven, who knows how to pace a picture like this, and build up to a satisfying, blowout finale. The scene during which Sidney must crawl out a car

window over an unconscious Ghostface is highly suspenseful, and the finale with the talking killer, though a little long, is a strong note to go out on. Williamson should also be commended for maintaining the style of *Scream* while simultaneously deepening it.

***Snow White: A Tale of Terror* * * * .**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Sigourney Weaver (Lady Claudia); Sam Neill (Fredric Hoffman); Gil Bellows (Will); Taryn Davis (Little Lilly); David Conrad (Peter Gutenberg); Brian Glover (Lars); Monica Keena (Lilly Hoffman); Anthony Brophy (Rolf); Frances Cuka (Nannau); Christopher Bauer (Konrad); John Edward Allen (Bart).

CREW: Polygram Filmed Entertainment and Universal Pictures and Interscope Communications present a Michael Cohn film. *Casting:* Simone Reynolds, Linda Lowry. *Music:* John Ottman. *Costume Designer:* Marit Allen. *Film Editor:* Ian Crafford. *Production Designer:* Gemma Jackson. *Director of Photography:* Mike Southon. *Co-Producer:* Tim Van Rellim. *Executive Producers:* Ted Field, Robert W. Cort, Scott Kroopf. *Written by:* Tom Szollosi, Deborah Serra. *Produced by:* Tom Engelman. *Directed by:* Michael Cohn. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Little Lilly's mother dies in childbirth, leaving her father, Hoffman (Neil), to remarry the elegant but cold Lady Claudia (Weaver). When Lilly is a teenager (Keena), Claudia's first child is stillborn, and she loses grip of her sanity. Using a mystical family heirloom, she plots the murder of Lilly and the re-birth of her dead son. Lilly flees to the forest and befriends a group of unwashed thugs, including the heroic Will (Bellows), even as her evil stepmother attempts another assassination, appearing to Lilly as an old witch proffering a poison apple.

COMMENTARY: It may not seem apparent on first blush, but the old fairy tale *Snow White* (or *Schneewitchen*, in German) is actually just an interloper story.

A beautiful and pure princess must deal with a usurper in her immediate family, an evil stepmother who employs magic and sorcery to mesmerize her father, the King. This stepmother's goal is not just to

"steal" the father's affections, but to remove the princess of the family altogether and supplant her with the Queen's own progeny.

Interpreted as an interloper film, it's perfect that the gorgeously-shot *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* should be made in the 1990s, the most prominent modern decade for this screen "monster."

Of course, the Snow White story is also a "grim fairy tale" (literally a Grimm one) that utilizes characters from so-called "children's" stories to forge its horror. Unlike many of its brethren, including *Leprechaun* and *Rumpelstiltskin*, however, *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* doesn't take the expected route of high camp. On the contrary, it takes itself very, very seriously, to notable effect.

Here, the lovely princess Snow White, or Lilly (Davis) truly has "Black Luck," and faces death and destruction at the hands of the most wicked stepmother of all, played by none other than Sigourney Weaver.

Snow White: A Tale of Terror has one character inform Lilly that "The world is a dangerous place, princess," and that seems to be the guiding principle or conceit of this adaptation. Nothing can be taken for granted by Lilly. Not the love of a father; not even the attentions of a would-be Prince Charming, who turns out to be a cad.

One of the first shots in the film sets up the dangerous nature of Lilly's existence, when her birth is nearly thwarted. Wolves and crows gather around a moving carriage in the snow, just before disaster befalls it. Inside is Lilly's mother, carrying her in her womb. When the horse and carriage are toppled, the dying Queen demands that her husband cut out the child to save Lilly's life. The film then showcases shots of viscous red blood, spilling out on white snow, as the newborn arrives. It's a bloody sequence, and one that fits the title's description of a "Tale of Terror." *Snow White, Blood Red*. That's the movie's conceit.

In this beautiful but very dark fairy tale, the seven dwarves are actually thieves and thugs, and Claudia—the stepmother—is an accomplished sorceress or black magician. She possesses a mystical mirror and cabinet, a family heirloom that helps her further her ends. Weaver's portrayal of the stepmother is interesting, however, because Claudia is not depicted as evil throughout the film.

On the contrary, it is a sense of grief and great loss that makes Claudia evil: the loss of her child during grueling labor. Again, to bring up the interloper paradigm, loss is also the very thing that spurs the murderous and cruel actions of Rebecca De Mornay's character in *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992).

What is ironic about this here is that Claudia and Lilly should

clearly bond over their mutual tragedies. Lilly has lost a mother ... and needs one. Claudia has lost a child ... and needs one. Together, these two women could indeed form the crux of a blended family, but instead, their individual senses of victimization and suffering eternally separates them. Though they share loss in common, they are isolated by their hate for one another.

One of *Snow White: A Tale of Terror's* best and most haunting scenes involves Claudia, as an old crone, presenting Snow White the poison apple. One bite practically does Lilly in, and before you know it, the film cuts to the girl's funeral as she is buried alive in a glass-top coffin. The visualization of this sequence is splendid, literally the fairy tale story you know brought to life with the trappings and attitude of a horror film. The twist is that no Prince Charming, or at least not the one she expected, arrives to save Lilly.

If you've ever dreamed of a bloody version of *Snow White*, one wherein the princess takes up a crossbow and torch and jams a lit candle into an enemy's eye, this is your movie. Director Michael Cohn and writers Serra and Szollos have gone back to the heart of this grim fairy tale, removed all the decades and centuries of lightening it up for children, and forged a tale that's anything but harmless. Instead it's a chronicle of terror and loss about suffering, jealousy and an intruder taking up residence in the heart of a family.

No doubt the weirdest interloper film of the 1990s. Yet also one of the most beautifully conceived and filmed.

***Switchback* * ***

Critical Reception

"Personally, I'll die a happy man if I never have to watch another film in which an obsessed FBI agent tracks down a brilliant psychopath."—Paul Tatara, *CNN*, " *Switchback*— Pain, Trains and Automobiles," November 16, 1997

"... Stuart tries hard to keep things interesting, lacing his clichés with unusual twists and turns, even going so far as to challenge the very profile of a serial killer entirely. But without the motivations and characterization to drive them, the twists become little more than mechanical contrivances that underscore an otherwise thoroughly uninspired concept."—Wade Major, *Box Office Magazine*, "Switchback," October 30,

Cast and Crew

CAST: Dennis Quaid (Agent Frank La Cross); Danny Glover (Bob Goodall); Jared Leto (Lane Dixon); Ted Levine (Nate); William Fichtner (Jack McGinniss); Leo Burmeister (Shorty); R. Lee Ermey (Buck Olmstead); Louise Schaefer (Sim); Tommy Puett (Ben); Ken Thorley (Morgue Attendant); Walt Goggins (Bud); Stuart Grant (Luke); Merle Kennedy (Betty).

CREW: Rysher Entertainment and Paramount Pictures presents a Pacific Western Production, a Jeb Stuart film. *Casting:* Pam Dixon Mickelson. *Costume Designer:* Betsy Heimann. *Music:* Basil Poledouris. *Film Editor:* Conrad Buff. *Production Designer:* Jeff Howard. *Director of Photography:* Oliver Wood. *Executive Producers:* Keith Samples, Mel Efros, Jeb Stuart. *Written and directed by:* Jeb Stuart. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 118 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On the eve of a sheriff 's election in rural Texas, a serial killer strikes. Sheriff Buck Olmstead (Ermey), facing re-election problems, gladly accepts the help of an F.B.I. agent named Frank La Cross (Quaid) on the case, unaware that La Cross may have a personal reason for his involvement. At the same time that law enforcement authorities hunt the serial killer, two men, Lane Dixon (Leto) and Bob Goodall (Glover), share a ride together, headed west.

COMMENTARY: A police procedural concerning a serial killer, *Switchback* opens with a superbly orchestrated and hair-raising sequence. A babysitter and a little boy are home alone, when a stranger appears on the front porch, amicably claiming to be a family friend. The stranger leaves without incident, but when the babysitter checks the back door she finds it unlocked.

Director Jeb Stuart then leads the audience on a tour through this dimly-lit, upscale suburban house, as the babysitter checks the windows, and then checks on the young ward. The cuts are precise and the action is harrowing. There's nothing tentative or mild about this opener.

The rest of *Switchback* doesn't really live up to the inaugural scene, though it is beautifully photographed and features some great location shooting in the American West. Part of the problem again arises from the familiarity of the written material, and the over-

familiarity of the story's point of attack. *Switchback* is another police procedural about hunting a serial killer, of course, but the movie also features the F.B.I. agent with a "tragic" incident in his recent past (regarding a child), that darned wrong-headed superior, here Buck's replacement as sheriff (played by the always-impressive William Fichtner), and an extended interlude involving the red herring.

Switchback is unique, if for no other reason, than because it depicts an African American serial killer. And if you've seen *Copycat* and listened to Helen's speech on serial killers in that film, you know that this isn't common. Although Glover's character, Bob, drives his memorable state-of-the-art porn mobile (literally a car upholstered with porno photographs), the character is not distinguished in any other significant way. He apparently wants to be killed by the police (specifically, Frank, actually), but the reasons for his anti-social behavior are not examined.

As is the case with virtually all cinematic serial killers of the 1990s, Bob Goodall is apparently brilliant, and sends cryptic messages like "Believe" to Frank in an effort to commit suicide by F.B.I. agent. Frank eventually figures them out, and the movie ends with a tense battle on a train in picturesque western territory.

R. Lee Erney registers strongly here as the principled sheriff who gives up his position and authority (and re-election hopes) to do something right, and *The Silence of the Lamb's* Buffalo Bill, Ted Levine, has a supporting role as a cop. They have a nice, on-screen chemistry together, not that it helps the movie move any faster.

It's probably unfair to write that if you've seen one serial killer police procedural horror film of the 1990s, you've seen them all. But after you've seen two (preferably *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Se7en*) you really have seen enough of them for a life-time. Efforts like *Switchback* and *Blink* are impressively-mounted as A-list productions but written, apparently, on total automatic pilot.

***Tales from the Crypt: Bordello of Blood* ***

Critical Reception

"Miller is the best thing about the film, but a little of him goes a long way, and he's on screen a lot.... This is a travesty, and if *Tales from the Crypt* publisher Bill Gaines isn't spinning in his grave, it can only be because someone's already put a stake

through his heart."— *TV Guide*, <http://movies.tvguide.com/tales-crypt-pre-sents-bordello-blood/review/131306>

Cast and Crew

CAST: Dennis Miller (Rafe Guttman); Erika Eleniak (Katherine Verdoux); Angie Everhart (Lilith); Chris Sarandon (Jimmy Current); Corey Feldman (Caleb); William Sadler (Mummy); Aubrey Morris (McCutheon); Phil Fondacaro (Vincent Prather); Ciara Hunter (Tammi); Leslie Ann Phillips (Patrice); Eli Gabay (Miguel); Matt Hill (Reggie); John Kassir (The Crypt Keeper). **CREW:** Universal Studios presents a film by Gilbert Adler. *CASTING:* Victoria Burrows. *MUSIC:* Michael Kamen, Chris Boardman. *FILM EDITOR:* Stephen Lovejoy. *PRODUCTION DESIGNER:* Gregory Melton. *DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:* Tom Priestley. *TALES FROM THE CRYPT* Originally published by: William M. Gaines. *STORY BY:* Bob Gale, Robert Zemeckis. *EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS:* Richard Donner, David Giler, Walter Hill Joel Silver, Robert Zemeckis. *PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY:* Gilbert Adler. *MPAA RATING:* R. *RUNNING TIME:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the distant jungle, an occultist revives Lilith (Everhart), the mother of all vampires and the most horrible woman who ever lived. Later, in Los Angeles, a loser named Caleb (Feldman) visits a bordello actually run by Lilith and her vampire minions. Caleb's sister Katherine (Eleniak) hires a down-on-his-luck detective, Rafe Guttman (Miller), to investigate his disappearance. What he finds is alarming: an unholy alliance between Lilith and right-wing preacher Jimmy Current (Sarandon).

COMMENTARY: "Tonight's tawdry tale," to quote the Crypt Keeper, is one that sullies the good name of *Tales from the Crypt*. Unlike the interesting *Demon Knight* (1995), the exploitively titled *Bordello of Blood* plays more like a cash-grab and desperate last gasp of a commercial property than an actual movie.

Comedian Dennis Miller is the film's unquestionable star, and his smarmy, arrogant performance is at the root of the movie's problems. Miller projects an inordinate pleasure with himself, and he quips through the whole movie, essentially condescending to all the other characters, not to mention the horror genre, in the process.

Miller can effectively do irony, and that's absolutely all. Accordingly, there's no sense of connection between Miller or any of

the other performers; he just plays a comedian joking his way through a narrative that badly needs a center to hold it together.

Given the inordinate amount of smarm projected by Miller, it's virtually impossible to believe that any woman would be attracted to his character in the film, let alone two women, even if Rafe does possess a "blood-type not tasted since Ivan the Terrible."

The terrible part is spot-on.

Angie Everhart is a lot more likable than Miller is, but simply doesn't possess the acting chops to adequately project the evil nature of Lilith. The model-turned-actress is out of her element as the "mother of all vampires," and another example of weird stunt casting.

Bordello of Blood is pandering. There's a lot of female pulchritude on hand, a lot of quips, and much gore, but the whole experience is an uncomfortable wallow in the mud. The movie tries hard to echo the hipness and relevance of the *Scream* movies, with Miller joking about "weird Duchovnyian riffs" and all, but everything about the movie leaves a bad taste in the mouth. By the time the climax rolls around, you don't care who lives and who dies because the movie is just a bad joke, told at great length.

On a narrative level, the plot doesn't even make much sense. No one in his right mind would visit a bordello on the recommendation of a twitching, bulging-eyed lunatic, as happens here. (Yeah, cuz *that's* sexy!)

Worse, the final confrontation occurs on a church stage, utilizing a prop laser that somehow fires real beams (in the shape of a crucifix, no less).

You know, I didn't realize that the fundamentalists had perfected particle beam weapons...

Tales from the Crypt: Bordello of Blood is a cynical, desperate movie and a sad ending to the *Tales from the Crypt* franchise. When people talk about how bad horror movies were in the 1990s, *Bordello of Blood* is probably what they meant. With a top-notch franchise name on the marquee, audiences expected a modicum of competence in story-telling and style. They expected, at least, a baseline level of entertainment.

But *Bordello of Blood* is a lot like Dennis Miller's failed late-night talk shows: it underperforms consistently.

Uncle Sam * * .

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christopher Ogden (Jody); William Smith (Major); David "Shark" Fralick (Sam Harper); Leslie Neale (Sally Neale); Matthew Flint (Phil); Anne Tremko (Louise Harper); Tim Grimm (Ralph); P.J. Soles (Madge Cronin); Thom McFadden (Mac Cronin); Zachary McLemore (Barry Cronin); Morgan Paull (Mayor); Richard Cummings, Jr. (Dan); Robert Forster (Congressman Cummings); Bo Hopkins (Sgt. Twining); Frank Pesce (Barker); Timothy Bottoms (David Crandall); Isaac Hayes (Jed Crowley).

CREW: Gable Productions Presents a George G. Braunstein Production of a William Lustig Picture. *Casting:* Karen Rea. *Line Producer:* Don Daniel. *Costume Designer:* Amy Wetherbee. *Music:* Mark Governor. *Film Editor:* Bob Murawski. *Production Designer:* Charlotte Malmlof. *Director of Photography:* James Lebovitz. *Associate Producer:* Gina Fortunato. *Produced by:* George R. Braunstein. *Written by:* Larry Cohen. *Directed by:* William Lustig. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The corpse of U.S. soldier Sam Harper (Fralick) is recovered three years after Desert Storm in Kuwait. Sam's body is returned to his hometown of Twin Rivers in July, to the home of his wife, Louise (Tremko), his sister, and his curious, patriotic young nephew, Jody (Ogden). Jody still worships his "Uncle Sam" for his courageous service in the Gulf War and keeps all of his uncle's medals, but he is unaware that in life Sam was an abusive alcoholic, one who terrified his wife and family. Now, on the July 4th holiday, Uncle Sam returns to life to destroy those whom he deems unpatriotic, including teenage flag burners, a draft-dodging schoolteacher (Bottoms) and a lawyer who helps tax cheats and dislikes "The Star-Spangled Banner."

COMMENTARY: A genre film of the "grim fairy tale" variety (like *Leprechaun*, *Rumpelstiltskin* and *Jack Frost*), William Lustig's *Uncle Sam* utilizes folklore, in this case American folklore, to create an easily recognizable and colorful Boogeyman. But what separates *Uncle Sam* from many of its campy brethren in this subgenre is the fact that it has an overt point of view about 1990s America.

The historical Uncle Sam—a larger than life figure representing the U.S. government—was first depicted in cartoons as early as 1812, and Lustig's film presents an opening montage in black-and-white that tracks this character's "life" throughout American history.

The film displays archival footage from the early days of the nation, right through the heyday of Eisenhower in the 1950s and beyond. Uncle Sam, the audience understands from the images, is an enduring symbol of American patriotism. But whose property is he? Many people, many *politicians* have wanted to claim him as the exclusive property of one political party, and not as historical Americana.

Written by Larry Cohen with a keen eye towards social commentary, *Uncle Sam* asks some pretty serious questions about what it means to be a patriotic American at the end of the 20th century. It's also determinedly anti-war in stance, and gazes at the way our youth (especially our boys) are indoctrinated into a culture of violence through toys and myth-making.

When young Jody finally realizes that Sam Harper is not a "hero," and that war—though sometimes necessary—does not make one great (to quote Yoda), the adolescent burns up all his war-centric toys, including Milton Bradley's game "Battleship" and several G.I. Joe toys. This is something you are not likely to see in a mainstream, big studio release: the torching of brand-name toys!

Dressed as Uncle Sam in red, white and blue, Sam Harper's killing spree involves the soldier's perceptions of American ideals and patriotism. A schoolteacher who dodged the draft in Vietnam, played by Timothy Bottoms, is one victim. He gets an axe to the head. Harper considers him a coward, but early on Crandall pointedly asks Jody about the greater wrong: blindly following orders in an unjust war, or avoiding service. Which is it?

Teenagers who burn American flags in a cemetery are also treated accordingly in *Uncle Sam*: one is strung up the flag pole (to a menacing rendition of "Reveille"), and another is buried alive.

As Cohen and Lustig were no doubt aware, both of these scenes (involving draft dodgers and flag desecrators) carried strong contemporary resonances. In particular, the first George Bush and cronies like Lee Atwater were notorious for fomenting feelings of deep patriotism among voters during Bush's two presidential campaigns.

In the first Bush campaign in 1988, a rumor circulated in Republican circles that a photo from the 1960s existed depicting Michael Dukakis's wife Kitty burning an American flag. No such photo existed, but the Bush political machine was unmatched in message consistency. At the same time those unsubstantiated rumors were widely disseminated, the candidate visited a flag manufacturing plant in New Jersey and pushed for a constitutional amendment requiring students to say the Pledge of Allegiance. While an unofficial campaign

to tar an opponent as unpatriotic was mounted, the candidate simultaneously wrapped himself in the Stars-and-Stripes.

In his second campaign in 1992, Bush attempted to tar his new opponent, Bill Clinton, as a draft dodger during the Vietnam War. Again, this accusation was far from factual. Clinton had been the recipient of a legal student deferment and was also a Rhodes Scholar during the Vietnam Era. Still, Bush pushed the point while assiduously avoiding the conflict that both his vice president and his own son, George W., had strings pulled for them so they could stay stateside in the National Guard.

Ultimately, the Bush-Quayle campaign even broke Federal law (and had to pay a \$10,000 fine) for failing to report the cost of a banner reading "No Draft Dodger for President" paid for by a South Carolina fundraiser.

Considering these current events, *Uncle Sam* is really about those who "co-opt" American symbols so as to be portrayed as heroic and patriotic when the truth is that they're just exploiting them.

Specifically, the movie's villain Sam Harper is an alcoholic, a child rapist, and a wife abuser, yet he still wraps himself in the trappings of Old Glory (and Uncle Sam) and is considered by the military to be a "hero" for his behavior in war. "He fought a war in his house all his life," Sam's wife tells the impressionable Jody, thus exposing the true "Uncle Sam" to the boy.

Lustig's movie also finds time to criticize the Gulf War effort as a bid to control the oil supply. "It was all about keeping some rich Arabs rich," says a lawyer who is also murdered for not being patriotic enough. There's even a scene involving a high-school student who mocks the National Anthem on stage, a reference to Roseanne Barr's 1990 off-pitched rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at a San Diego Padres game.

All of this commentary is interesting, valuable and on-point, but *Uncle Sam* is not particularly scary. Nor is it well-acted, except in the case of Isaac Hayes as a veteran who has turned his back on modern warfare because "today is all mixed up."

The movie looks cheap, and the directing is generally unimaginative, especially given Lustig's pedigree in the genre. It was a great and inventive idea to make a boogeyman out of the Uncle Sam character and to question what it means to be authentically patriotic in the 1990s, but the movie is dull.

That's not always the case, however. Early in the film, Lustig crafts a masterful and telling scene transition. He cuts from Jody

promising fealty to a future president in times of war to an image of Sam's casket rolled out of a hearse trunk.

Blind, unthinking patriotism in the young can lead directly to the death of American boys. That's what these images inform us with no uncertainty. Part of real patriotism is the right to dissent from the government, and the right to freely express ideas, without interference. Theodore Roosevelt, a Republican president, wrote, "It is unpatriotic not to tell the truth, whether about the president or anyone else."

Though not a great horror movie, Cohen and Lustig's *Uncle Sam* certainly lives up to that definition. It tells the truth, pretty or not.

The Ugly * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Rebecca Hobbs (Karen Schumaker); Paolo Rotando (Simon Cartwright); Roy Ward (Dr. Marlow); Vanessa Byrnes (Julie); Sam Wallace (Simon, aged 13); Paul Glover (Phillip); Chris Grahlan (Robert); Jennifer Ward-Lealand (Evelyn); Darien Takle (Marge); Cathy McWhirter (Helen Ann Millar); Carolyn Beaver (Helen's Friend); Cacle Popei (Simon, age 4); Aaron Buskin (Roland); Beth Allen (Julie, age 13); Sarah Pivic (Deaf Girl).

CREW: Trimark Pictures with the New Zealand Film Commission and Essential Productions presents a Scott Reynolds film. *Director of Photography:* Simon Raby. *Production Designer:* Grant Major. *Film Editor:* Wayne Cook. *Casting:* Maura Fay and Associates. *Special Make-up Effects:* Richard Taylor, Weta Ltd. *Music:* Victoria Kelly. *Produced by:* Jonathan Dowling. *Written and directed by:* Scott Reynolds. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A renowned criminal psychologist, Karen Shoemaker (Hobbs), assesses an incarcerated serial killer named Simon Cartwright (Rotando). A multiple-murderer, Simon is driven to kill by strange compulsions and an alter-ego he calls "The Ugly." He confesses to Karen that "visitors" (his dead victims) also urge him to commit murder.

COMMENTARY: This serial killer movie from New Zealand is a deeply unsettling viewing experience, and it really gets under the skin. *The Ugly* concerns a serial killer, the so-called "Simple Simon," and his attempts to literally get inside the head of a psychologist evaluator, Karen (Hobbs).

Like *The Silence of the Lambs*, much of the film involves a one-on-one interview between a beauty (the interviewer) and a beast (the serial killer). *The Ugly* utilizes flashbacks and bursts of almost insane, manic energy, to depict the nature of this killer.

In terms of style, *The Ugly* points very much towards much of the cinema and television of the 2000s. Much is vetted by a shaky camera and quick cuts. As a whole, the film feels less formal and more naturalistic than many horrors of the 1990s. *The Ugly* also feels impressionistic. For instance, all of the killer's victims seem to possess black blood, a visual cue suggesting that Simon never saw them as human, which made them easier to kill.

The Ugly offers some startling transitions and jump-cuts. Twice Simon asks Karen to remove his shackles, and twice the film cuts to what's on his mind in that moment. He jumps out of his seat and viciously murders Karen. Fortunately, she doesn't release him, and these images remain phantasms, only impulsive thoughts.

The murders in *The Ugly* are quite gruesome too. One murder is lensed in red light, and the assault happens fast, with shaky camera movements and a cranked-up shutter speed. The imagery approximates madness and it works just right for the material.

As is sometimes the case with modern horror films, *The Ugly* is better stylistically than substantively. Many aspects of the narrative are familiar, from the interview structure, to the characterizations (which include a Chilton-esque, unhelpful warden), to serial killer paradigm features like the important newspaper clippings. In terms of 1990s context, the film touches on the fact that monsters like Simon are big business. Accordingly, neither Simon nor the warden is sure if Karen is really interested in helping or rather just enhancing her own celebrity.

Another clever aspect of *The Ugly* involves Simon's alter ego, "The Ugly," short for the Ugly Duckling. Throughout the film, he visualizes himself as ugly and scarred, when empirically— from watching him— we know he is not scarred. This is odd, but it gets the point of a serial killer's twisted self-image well. What isn't so consistent is Simon's discussion of the "visitors," the specters of the people he has killed. Simon tells Karen they urge him to kill again, but he clearly names them after seeing the word "Visitors" on Karen's badge. That's an

indication he's lying. Later, we find out he really does see ghosts, contradicting that earlier revelation. The movie could have used a little more clarity on this point.

The Ugly is an obscure horror film but a genuinely impressive one. With the exception of two cartoony security guards, the film is remarkably well-acted and does a good job of using "rubber reality" as a manifestation of a killer's sick mind. And even though we witness Simon commit terrible crimes and imagine worse ones, the film builds up a sense of empathy for him. He seems to be a man in the grip of things he doesn't understand, of a childhood that isn't what it should be.

Early in the film, another inmate puts on

3-D glasses and then gazes at Simon, and that's the approach the filmmakers adopt too. The film is violent and harsh, but also human and intriguing, appropriately 3-D.

***The Vampire Journals* * * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: David Gunn (Zachary); Jonathan Morris (Ash); Kirsten Cerre (Sofia); Ilinka Goya (Cassandra); Dan Condurach (Anton); Star Andreef (Iris); Costica Babvulescu (Vampire); Michai Dinvale (Dimitri); Mihai Niculescu (Walter); Petre Moraru (General); Radica Lupu (Rebecca); Floriella Grappini (Serena); Diana Lupani (Angelica); Maria Caraman (Oracle).

CREW: Full Moon Studios Presents a Ted Nicalaou Film. *Casting:* Robert MacDonald, Perry Bullington. *Film Editor:* Gregory Sanders. *Director of Photography:* Adolfo Bartoli. *Music:* Richard Kosinski. *Production Designer:* Valentin Calinescu. *Costume Designer:* Oana Paunescu. *Make-up Effects:* Mark Rappaport, Creature FX. *Executive Producer:* Charles Band. *Produced by:* Vlad Paunescu. *Written and directed by:* Ted Nicolaou. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 79 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The age-old vampire, Zachary (Gunn), still mourning the death of his true love, Rebecca (Lupu), attempts to save a lovely pianist, Sofia (Cerre), from the advances of the nefarious master vampire, Ash (Morris). During a recital at Ash's Club Muse, Sofia is captured and bitten by the monstrous creature of the night. Zachary

confronts Ash with the stolen Blade of Laertes, and attempts to steal away with Sofia.

COMMENTARY: An off-shoot of the *Subspecies* franchise, *Vampire Journals* is the Harlequin Romance equivalent of a horror movie. Dominated by absolutely gorgeous Eastern European settings, extravagant costumes, and romantic characters of exaggerated pain and suffering, *Vampire Journals* is sort of *Interview with a Vampire* on the cheap and cheesy side. Even the voice-over narrations sound as over-the-top as stereotypical Harlequin Romance prose.

The lead character in *Vampire Journals* is Zachary, a tormented "good" vampire battling his evil brethren, or as the screenplay terms him, "a vampire with a mortal's heart." Zachary delivers the movie's bombastic voice-over narration, and it is filled with unintentionally funny observations, delivered with the utmost solemnity. "I looked into her eyes, but I could not master her," he notes at one point of a vampire who "reeks of evil."

Maybe she should try some deodorant.

Invading the stronghold of his enemy, Ash, Zachary likewise notes that "the air of malevolence dwarfed my senses."

Yep, Zachary's observations definitely leave audiences with the impression that vampires, well, stink.

"You don't appreciate the smell of death?" A vampire asks at one point, further developing the olfactory nature of the vampire domain.

When Zachary isn't obsessing on smells, his musings are downright confusing. He notes, for instance, that "a master vampire is invulnerable to surprise attack." But the movie doesn't explain the how or why of this remark. If it is, by description, a "surprise attack," then how can anyone know to expect it and defend against it, even a Master? Likewise, by implication, attacks that are not a surprise (but what ... announced?) might get the job done?

By pointed contrast, the flamboyant Ash, the villain of the piece, seems to speak rather more bluntly. "You distract me with your sexuality," he declares, dismissing a vampire vixen from his presence.

Well, that certainly drives a stake through the heart of the matter.

It isn't just the dialogue that's funny. It's many of the situations in *Vampire Journals* too. In one vampire attack set on a night-time street, a car drives by the incident in plain sight (in the background of a shot) as a victim is jumped and bitten on the neck.

I wonder how that must have looked to the person driving in the car. More pertinently, I wonder why Ted Nicolaou didn't re-shoot the scene without the drive-by.

But, again, *Vampire Journals* doesn't seem to be in on the joke. Early in the proceedings, there's a shot of Sofia on stage, playing the piano. The camera captures her in profile, on one side of the frame, while we see the rapt audience on the other side of the frame. Included in the audience is Zachary ... who, with his pancake-make-up complexion and vampire fangs, sticks out like a sore thumb. It's just ridiculous, this overtly "vampiric" man sitting there amongst humans, unnoticed.

How come not a single human being in this movie ever realizes he or she is conversing with a vampire, even in the clear presence of sharpened molars and undead complexion?

Even with such lapses into silliness, one can't entirely dismiss *Vampire Journals*. It was filmed in Bucharest, Romania, and the environs of these vampires are absolutely stunning. The Old World architecture is a character in the play itself, and indeed contributes a strong atmosphere to the film. Although *Vampire Journals* is not, generally, well-regarded even among Nicolaou fans, it is undeniably the best-looking picture he's made.

Thematically, however, *Vampire Journals* is a retread of *Subspecies*. Sofia plays the Denice Duff role here: a woman converted against her will to the dark night of vampirism by a dominating, aggressive male. Ash is the dark master, the equivalent of Ander Hoves' Radu, but without a hint of the depth that Hoves brings to the four strong *Subspecies* series. Yes, Radu is often ridiculous, what with his oversized hands and constant drooling blood, but there's something in that performance that is recognizable as human and genuine ... even if he is pathetic. Jonathon Morris's Ash is a snide fop, and not much else.

The 2000s brought emo vampires back to the forefront of the pop culture with *Twilight* (2008) and *Twilight: New Moon* (2009), and, surprisingly, those films were just as purple as *Vampire Journals* ... but considerably better received, at least by fans. Someone ought to let Ted Nicolaou direct one.

***Wes Craven Presents Wishmaster* * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Tammy Lauren (Alexandra Amberson); Andrew Divoff (Djinni/Nathaniel Demarest); Chris Lemmon (Nick); Wendy Benson (Shannon Amberson); Tony Crane (Josh Aickman); Jenny O'Hara (Wendy Derleth); Kane Hodder (Merrit's Guard); Tony Todd (Johnny Valentine); Robert Englund (Raymond Beaumont); Rico Ross (Lt. Nathanson); John Byner (Doug Clegg); George Buck Flower (Homeless Man); Gretchen Palmer (Ariella); Ted Raimi (Ed Finney); Reggie Bannister (Pharmacist); Angus Scrimm (Narrator); Josef Pilato (Mickey Torelli).

CREW: Live Entertainment and Wes Craven Present a Pierre David Production, a Robert Kurtzman film. *Casting:* Cathy Henderson, Martin and Dori Zuckerman. *Special Make-up Effects by:* Robert Kurtzman, Greg Nicotero, Howard Berger. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* Thomas C. Rainone. *Costume Designer:* Karyn Wagner. *Music:* Harry Manfredini. *Film Editor:* David Handman. *Production Designer:* Deborah Raymond, Dorian Vernacchio. *Director of Photography:* Jacques Haitkin. *Line Producer:* Russ Markowitz. *Executive*

Producer: Wes Craven. *Co-Producer:* David Tripet. *Produced by:* Pierre David, Clark Peterson, Noel A. Zanitsch. *Written by:* Peter Atkins. *Directed by:* Robert Kurtzman. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A gemologist named Alex (Lauren) inadvertently releases a monstrous, soul-sucking Djinni (Divoff) from his thousand year prison in a fine opal. The Djinni, a "wishmaster," puts Alex through hell in an attempt to grant her three wishes ... an act which will open a bridge between the djinn's evil world and the earth itself.

COMMENTARY: *Wishmaster* is a visually-spectacular, rubber-reality grim fairy tale about a mythical Djinni. In some ways, the well-directed film from special effects maestro Robert Kurtzman plays like the rubber reality sequel to a 1980s horror movie never made. The film is not thematically deep or contextually important to the decade of the 1990s. Instead, *Wishmaster* is an occasionally inspired horror roller-coaster ride filled with amazing "gags" and effects.



Be careful what you wish for. The Djinni (Andrew Divoff) appears in *Wes Craven Presents Wishmaster* (1997). Divoff) appears

Like many rubber reality or grim fairy tale films, *Wishmaster* involves the malevolent efforts of a folkloric, talking villain to destroy the forces of good. At his disposal, he can re-shape reality itself (as Freddy re-shapes the dream sphere, or Pinhead can open the door to Hell). Also like Freddy, the Djinni uses the psychological weaknesses of his victims against them while orchestrating their spectacular demises.

Instead of confronting characters with their deepest dream fears (like becoming a puppet, drowning, or over-eating), the Djinni turns the "wishes" of his enemies against them in creative and deadly fashion. The film's tag-line expresses the movie's leitmotif to a tee: "be careful what you wish for."

In typical fashion, the rubber-reality, grim fairy tale-styled villain is opposed by a feisty and independent final girl, one who ultimately uses the tricks of the monster's trade against him.

In some ways, *Wishmaster* has the same plot as films like *Leprechaun* or *Rumpelstiltskin*, but this is better acted than either of those efforts, and the special effects are top drawer. Also, the victim pool in *Wishmaster* comes from the highest ranks of genre celebrities, and includes Robert Englund, Tony Todd, Kane Hodder, George Buck Flower, and *Phantasm*'s Reggie Bannister.

Wishmaster features a nifty dramatic structure too: disgusting, visually-spectacular party scenes book-end the film and provide a unity to the proceedings. The terror that occurred in Persia is reflected in the terror at the end of the film, in 1990s America. These scenes provide literate cohesion to a film that depends largely on self-contained set-pieces, and depict rattling, show-stopping special effects. Statues come to life, ambulatory piano wire decapitates screaming victims, people are transformed into glass and stone with finesse. A room full of warrior statues also comes memorably to life, and people find themselves trapped in paintings at the drop of a hat. **Divoff) appears**

Although *Wishmaster's* formula of bloody set-piece followed by cringe-worthy quip or wisecrack is as old as the Djinni himself, Andrew Divoff makes an impact as the chain-smoking Djinni, and Tammy Lauren is resourceful and committed as Alex.

Still, in the post- *Scream* age, their characters (and the story itself) seem a throwback to the 1980s, say right around 1987–1988, the era of rubber reality sequels such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* and *Hellbound: Hellraiser 2*. *Wishmaster* doesn't evidence the underlying terror of either of those films, but it's still a hell of a party.

1998

January 12:

Paula Jones accuses President Clinton of sexual harassment.

January 26:

President Clinton denies a sexual relationship with a former White House Intern, the 24-year-old Monica Lewinsky.

March 24:

The Jonesboro Massacre: At an Arkansas high school, two pre-adolescent boys launch a murder spree that takes the lives of five. Ten are injured.

March 27:

The anti-impotence drug Viagra is approved for consumer use by the FDA.

April 14:

The by-mail DVD rental service Netflix is born.

May 14:

NBC airs the final episode of its top-rated sitcom, Seinfeld (1989–1998), a show "about nothing." In the controversial final installment, Jerry Seinfeld and his three best friends all go to jail, in part due to their cynicism and lackadaisical attitude towards the witnessing of a crime.

August 7:

U.S. Embassy bombings in Tanzania and Nairobi occur. It is the work of Al-Qaeda.

August 19:

In grand jury testimony, President Bill Clinton admits an improper physical relationship with Monica Lewinsky. The same night, he takes to the national airwaves to explain his testimony and appears angry and without remorse.

September 4:

Google Inc. is founded.

October 6:

Gay college student Matthew Shephard is assaulted in Wyoming because of his sexuality. He dies on October 12.

October 29:

77-year-old astronaut John Glenn returns to space aboard the shuttle Discovery.

November 3:

Former professional wrestler Jesse Ventura is elected to the governorship of Minnesota.

November 19:

Impeachment hearings against President Clinton (regarding Monica Lewinsky) begin in the House of Representatives. The hearings are conducted by Republican Henry Hyde, who had a marital affair in his forties and called it "a youthful indiscretion."

Articles of Impeachment against President Clinton are delivered to the Senate.

***Apt Pupil* * * 1/2**

Critical Reception

"Director Bryan Singer's follow-up to his stunning *The Usual Suspects*, *Apt Pupil* skitters absurdly between psychodrama, high school dating angst, and Grand Guignol à la King. It wants to be a shocking meditation on the fascist lurking in us all, but it's too messy and bombastic to take seriously."—Jan Stuart, *The Advocate*, Issue 771, October 27, 1998, page 75

"Everything in *Apt Pupil* emanates from the surface. There's no all-encompassing malaise projected. Nor is there a hint of the sexiness of evil, a component whose lure can't be underestimated. Singer routinely tosses TV sitcoms and cartoons into the mix, apparently offering their banality as a segue to evil's inherent triteness. But Singer's insistence on dramatically delivering too many knockout punches compromises that interesting idea."—Brent Klierer, "*Apt Pupil* Studies the Nature of Evil," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, October 30, 1998, page 39

"*Apt Pupil* devotes a lot of time to hinting that its clear-eyed hero, with his sensitive lips and lithe, hairless torso, might desire something other than the standard issue girlfriend. Todd stubbornly refrains from going on dates; when thrown together with a young woman, apparently against his will, he fails to rise to the occasion. (She offers oral gratification in the front seat of his father's car. He tells her he's got a headache.) But after gym class, Todd lingers in the showers till his fingertips turn into prunes. In the midst of all that steamy young flesh he has one of those nightmarish visions that are so common on Elm Street and in the genre's cheaper neighborhoods: Present-day reality dissolves, and the shower room fills with figures from a concentration camp."—Stuart Klawans, *The Nation*, "Scream 4:

"Like *Misery*, the excruciating violence of Stephen King's source material has once again been toned down by Hollywood for mass consumption, but unlike *Misery*, the casting is perfect. The original novella's ending was its only weakness, and the revisions here actually work better."—John Bowen, *Rue Morgue*

"In between making a splash with *The Usual Suspects* and turning to the superhero genre, Bryan Singer turned in this underrated Stephen King adaptation starring Sir Ian McKellen as a former Nazi in hiding. David Schwimmer is completely miscast, but this flick is never less than eminently watchable, thanks mainly to McKellen's gripping performance."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Ian McKellen (Kurt Dussander/Arthur Danker); Brad Renfro (Todd Bowden); Bruce Davis (Mr. Bowden); Elias Koteas (Archie); Joe Morton (Detective Richie); Jan Triska (Isaac Weiskopf); Michael Byrne (Michael Kramer); Heather McComb (Becky); Joshua Jackson (Joey); David Schwimmer (Edward French).

CREW: Phoenix Pictures presents a Bad Hat Harry Production of a Bryan Singer Film. *Casting:* Francine Maisler. *Music:* John Ottman. *Film Editor:* John Ottman. *Production Designer:* Richard Hoover. *Director of Photography:* Newton Thomas, Sigel. *Co-Producer:* Thomas De Santo. *Executive Producer:* Tim Harbert. *Produced by:* Jane Hamsher, Don Murphy, Bryan Singer. *Based on the novella by:* Stephen King. *Screenplay by:* Brandon Boyce. *Directed by:* Bryan Singer. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 112 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A middle-class high school student, Todd Bowden (Renfro), determines that an old neighbor is actually Kurt Dussander (McKellen), an ex-Nazi higher-up who worked at Auschwitz. Instead of reporting the war criminal to the authorities, Todd blackmails him into telling him—in detail—all the atrocities of the concentration camps. As the relationship develops, Bowden's grades deteriorate and

he experiences nightmares. In order to keep the boy out of trouble, Dussander pretends to be Todd's grandfather to the school guidance counselor (Schwimmer) ... an act which assures their permanent entanglement and further crimes.

COMMENTARY: Bryan Singer's *Apt Pupil* is a relatively involving film, but also a whitewash of Stephen King's harrowing, riveting and highlytroubling 1982 novella.

The main problem arises in the movie's last act. In the novella, young American teenager Todd Bowden, in a final act of "glory" (or rather infamy), climbs a water tower and begins murdering innocent victims with his rifle, at least until killed and pulled down five hours later.

In the movie, Todd never does anything remotely so horrific. Instead, he just negotiates his way around the foolish guidance counselor played by David Schwimmer. That character was the first victim of Todd's spree in the novella.

In the latter half of the 1990s, such a decision smacks of cowardice and is virtually unforgivable in context of what was happening in the larger culture. Even before the shootings in Littleton, Colorado, in April of 1999, America suffered a slew of school shootings during the decade of *Apt Pupil*.

They happened in Scottsdale, Georgia, in 1996, in Bethel, Alaska, in 1997, in Paducah, Kentucky, in 1997, in Jonesboro, Arkansas, in 1998, and more. The question that parents and authorities kept asking themselves and the media was simply *why?* What was making our beloved children turn into deadly murderers? What was society at large missing, or failing to understand about the youngsters of the turn of the millennium?



Todd Bowden (Brad Renfro) wants to understand the nature of evil, and the nature of Nazis in *Apt Pupil* (1998).

Never was a film better timed or better positioned to deal with this context than Singer's *Apt Pupil*. Though written in the eighties, the King story is a perfect template, revealing by degrees how a seemingly "normal" kid can actually be something much worse: a violent sociopath.

Yet Singer's film doesn't go the distance. It rewrites and soft-peddles King's perfect ending and never gets around the novella's description of Bowden finally discovering his "hobby," his "thing": sadism. The result is a film that is not only unfaithful to its source material, but considerably less powerful than its source material.

Despite the whitewashing of the King story, the central performances by Ian McKellan and the late Bryan Renfro are terrific. And even if the movie can't connect the dots (having in fact, rearranged the dots), it at least knows to ask the right questions. *Apt Pupil* opens with a teacher discussing Nazi, Germany, and wondering if it came about for social reasons, cultural ones, or economic ones. That's the question America was asking at the end of the twentieth century too. *What was causing the youth culture to act out so egregiously?*

The movie also knows to ask the question "do you ever wonder how people do the things they do?" but by the removal of Todd's final, violent act, it fails to present the entire picture associated with it. Again, this seems baffling since the movie ties together Danker's assault on a cat with Bowden's murder of a wounded bird. We know that the killing of small animals is one early step on the path to becoming a serial killer, but *Apt Pupil* robs us of seeing that as Bowden's destination. He never becomes the sniper ... just another

affluent, good-looking kid who got away with a crime. While this ending may be more cynical in that the guilty go free, it robs the story of its point. Violence coaxed to bloom will, eventually, bloom. *Apt Pupil* never faces that fact.

Perhaps *Apt Pupil* deserves some measure of respect for dealing with a real "human" horror rather than the phony, supernatural variety. The scenes involving recitations of Nazi atrocities are enough to make any empathetic person squirm with discomfort and unease. Yet, even this horrific material, in its own way, is absolutely safe. Today, we can all gaze back with the comfortable distance of a half century and opine about how bad and terrible the Nazis were. We have nothing at stake in that particular battle, so it's easy to make a moral generalization.

What is tougher and more challenging? To make the case of morality about today, in our culture, right here, right now. About the entitlement of the American athletic class and the problems with kids like Todd. About the absence of parents in some middle-class homes because both parents must work to keep the family unit afloat. About money as the center of American life and as a substitute for ethical behavior, post-Reagan.

Apt Pupil doesn't really want to make that case. Which is not to say it lacks power altogether. There's a great moment here in which we realize that Todd has moved outside the mainstream. We see him looking through a fence at a baseball game, a sport he no longer participates in. He is alienated from his peers and from his culture, and this is the very thing that was true of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. They stopped seeing themselves as "part" of their community ... and as something else, something apart.

Again, this is perfect set-up for a murder spree that doesn't come in *Apt Pupil*, but it hints at the angst troubling many teens in 1990s America.

As it stands, *Apt Pupil* is a film satisfied with raising issues but not really addressing them or thinking them through. There's a "morbid fascination" here, and a meditation on "the responsibility of choice," but *Apt Pupil* never takes the final, blazing step and shows us what happens to boys like Todd when their dark sides are awakened.

We know too well from life that they don't just recede into the background and live a life of quiet desperation.

They erupt.

Critical Reception

"A surprisingly satisfying rock 'em, sock 'em escapist romp through a technostyled urban landscape."—Rod Dreher, *The New York Post*, August 21, 1998, page 57

"Blindingly overwrought hybrid of horror, action and Oedipal drama."—Justine Elias, *The Village Voice*, September 1, 1998, page 114

"As I watched it, I realized I'd seen it all before in *Mortal Kombat* and *Highlander*. Then there was some *Forever Knight* too, with a vampire trying to fight his destiny of becoming evil. *Blade* was just an amalgamation of everything that had come before."—Howard Margolin, host of *Destinies: The Voice of Science Fiction*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Wesley Snipes (Blade/Eric); Stephen Dorff (Deacon Frost); Kris Kristofferson (Abraham "Whistler"); N'Bushe Wright (Dr. Karen Jenson); Donal Logue (Quinn); Udo Kier (Dragonetti); Traci Lords (Racquel); Arly Jover (Mercury); Kevin Patrick Walls (Office Krieger); Judson Scott (Pallantine); Tim Guinee (Curtis Webb); Sanaa Lathan (Vanessa); Eric Edwards (Pearl); Donna Wong (Nurse); Carmen Thomas (Senior Resident); Kenneth Johnson (Heatseeking Dennis); Clint Curtis (Creepy Morgue Guy); Sidney Liufau (Japanese Doorman); Keith Leon Williams (Kam); Andray Johnson and Stephen R. Peluso (Paramedics); Marcus Aurelius (Pragmatic Policeman); John Enos III (Blood Club Bouncer); Eboni Adanis (Martial Arts Kid); Lycle Conway (Reichardt); Freeman White (Menacing Stud); D.V. De Vincents (Vampire Underling). Eril (Von Esper); Lennox Brow (Pleading Goon); Yvette Ocampo (Party Girl); Erence Stepa (Slavic Vampire); Jenya Lano (Russian Woman); Levani (Russian Vampire).

CREW: New Line Cinema Presents an Amen Ra Films Production in association with Imaginary Forces, a Stephen Norrington Picture, *Blade*. *CASTING:* Rachel Abroms, Jory Weitz. *MUSIC SUPERVISOR:* Dana

Sand. *Make-up Special Effects*: Greg Cannom. *Co-Producers*: Andrew J. Horne, John Divens. *Costume Design*: Sanja Milkovic Mays. *Music*: Mark Isham. *Director of Photography*: Theo Van De Sande. *Executive Producer*: Lynn Harris. *Executive Producers*: Stan Lee, Avi Arad, Joseph Calamari. *Produced by*: Peter Frankfurt, Wesley Snipes, Robert Engelman. *Blade and Deacon Frost Characters Created for Marvel Comics by*: Marv Wolfman, Gene Colan. *Stunt Coordinator*: Jeff Ward. *Martial Arts Choreography*: Jeff Ward, Wesley Snipes. *Written by*: David S. Goyer. *Directed by*: Stephen Norrington. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 120 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 1967, a child is born to a woman (Lathan) bitten by a vampire. Thirty-one years later, that boy is a man named Blade (Snipes), a vampire-human hybrid dedicated to fighting the vampire scourge that infests Los Angeles. Now "The Day walker" must tangle with Deacon Frost (Dorff) who has defied the secret vampire nation and begun to translate ancient scrolls in a computer archive so as to resurrect a god called La Magre. Meanwhile, Blade and his mentor, Whistler (Kristofferson), also comes to the aid of beautiful hematologist, Karen Jenson (Wright), after she has become infected with the blood of the undead.

COMMENTARY: Based on the 1970s comic book by Marv Wolfman and Gene Colan, Stephen Norrington's *Blade* is an action masterpiece set in a horror-themed world of vampires. The film offers several effective horror movie-style jolts and jumps, and even a degree of suspense too, particularly in one sequence wherein Wright's Karen Jenson is stalked by familiars upon return to her apartment.

But like many horror films of the 1990s, *Blade* is primarily notable for its dedicated attempts to recontextualize the vampire and vampire lore for modern audiences. Here, the vampires are not the romantic, Byron-esque breed of Anne Rice or the almost animalistic pack hunters and desert bugs of *John Carpenter's Vampires* (1998).

On the contrary, *Blade's* vampires are predatory business-men in Armani suits: a conspiratorial Old World cabal that relies on high-tech tools, secret back-room alliances with human political conspirators, plus a smug sense of racial superiority to lord it over less desirable half-castes. Importantly, Blade notes that these corporate monsters

"are everywhere," and they've got their "claws" into all walks of human life ... from finance to real-estate. In point of fact, the vampires own "half of downtown" Los Angeles. When the Vampire Nation meets, lawyers are present, and the discussion of most importance concerns "offshore accounts."

This vampiric ruling class in *Blade* may be a superficial metaphor for the "One World" movement often mentioned in conspiracy circles, which believe that the Rockefeller family, large banks, the Council on Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission secretly run the United States and the world. It's a Rich Old Boy's Club, one metaphorically "feeding" on the rest of the world, and *Blade* just makes that blood-sucking literal.

What *Blade* posits, for lack of a better word, is something like Hillary Clinton's so-called "vast right-wing conspiracy," one hip-deep in big business and big profits with its own exclusive rules about who can belong and who cannot. Notably, this vampire "house" even boasts a symbolic dependence on an ancient religion as a source of authority, in this case The Book of Erebus—"the Vampire bible"—to keep the minions in line.

The book's pages (written in blood) are displayed in glass cases—symbolically revered—but their meaning and substance is entirely forgotten until Deacon Frost forces a remembrance of them through his coup. And yep, this is exactly how the corporatist, Christianist "cult" on the right often use the Bible too ... as an outward sign of piety, but ignoring the relevant Scripture, especially any Biblical passages which paint a bleak outlook for the disposition of a rich man's soul.

In fascinating terms, Deacon Frost, the film's central villain, sees himself as a victim of race and a hierarchy that refuses to accept him. He was just "turned" into a vampire, you see, not a "pure blood." The other vampires, including board CEO-type Dragonetti (Udo Kier), use this origin as a way to demean and control Frost. He may serve the cause, but he will never be one of the Chosen Few. Deriding Frost is like the old rich deriding the nouveau rich, or an exclusive white man's club refusing to accept a black man of great accomplishment.

Blade is clever, however, in orchestrating Frost's revenge. He attempts to bring to life an ancient vampire blood god called La Magra who will render all genetic differences moot. Before La Magra, being "turned" or being "Pure Blood" will not matter: all will serve. His utopia, oddly enough, is the erasure of class and race lines.

Much of *Blade* involves this concept of racial identity. Blade himself is genetically half-vampire/half-man (*and* an African

American), and he rejects his vampire half by utilizing drugs to suppress his hunger for blood. At film's conclusion, however, Blade also realizes that he can never be at home with the humans either. Dr. Jenson offers him a cure for his vampirism, but it will rob him of his strength, speed and other vampire qualities. Blade realizes that's an impossible accommodation, since the war with the vampires still rages. By necessity he must remain what he is: an outsider in two worlds, the one and only "Daywalker."

Interestingly, neither side accepts Blade. The human world sees him as a law-breaker, by and large, a man who needs to be stopped and apprehended. The vampire world sees him as an enemy who must be destroyed. It is Frost, however, who is most disappointed in Blade because he senses that they have something in common. They are both derided by the vampire establishment. But Frost finds it mystifying that Blade should protect human beings, the equivalent of cattle. "Spare me the Uncle Tom routine," he barks at Blade in their first face-to-face meeting, thus contextualizing their shared experiences explicitly in racial terms.

All of this racial subtext is vetted in deft fashion throughout *Blade*, but it is the film's aggressive and colorful style that also makes it so memorable. For instance, at several points in the film, the movie incorporates fast-motion photography of Blade's metropolis going from daylight, to shadow, to darkness. The transition is rapid so that the shadows seem to crawl up glass skyscrapers and take on a life of their own (not entirely unlike Dracula's creeping silhouette in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* [1992]). But the technique isn't meant solely as an unsettling transition, it evokes something of the vampire perspective. The human world races by, from light to dark, but the vampires and their conspiracy are seemingly eternal. This is how the mortal realm might look to a creature of the night, as endless rush of days and nights, and back again.

Blade's trademark opening sequence, which is set at pulse-pounding, techno-scored Rave for vampires, is one of the best horror-action scenes of the decade. The film begins with a sexy woman (secretly a vampire) leading an unsuspecting human male into the crowded party. Before long, overhead sprinklers douse the gyrating revelers in gallons of human blood. Soon, the human realizes he's surrounded by vampires, and that he's the only human in attendance. The images are shocking, visceral and terrifying, as vampires sensuously rub blood all over their bodies, and the palette of the film goes from cold metallic blue to hot, lurid red.

Down on all fours (a position exposing his place in the food chain in this world), the human crawls for safety until he hits an immovable

object: Wesley Snipes' *Blade* making his stunning arrival in the film. The vampires back away in horror at the sight of the Daywalker, and Snipes remains frozen in the frame. That the vampires move, and Blade does not, asserts his "power" visually over his victims. What quickly follows Blade's arrival is a kinetic, fast and furious action scene. This blood-soaked battle between Blade and scores of vampires is a tour-de-force of choreography, stunt work, scoring, and editing. It starts *Blade* off with explosive force.

To some extent, the film's final battle between a possessed Frost and *Blade* can't match the exhilaration of that vigorous, red-blooded opening fight scene, but *Blade* still impresses with its sub-textual commentary on the rich preying on the weak and poor, and with its impressive sense of style. The visuals are so powerful that audiences may not notice some important lapses in believability, such as when Deacon Frost discovers that the ancient temple of La Magra is nearby—right there in L.A. but that the vampire elders have conveniently forgotten about.

Still, that's a minor quibble in a film that is one part superhero-epic, one part action-spectacular, and one part bloody vampire movie.

In short, *Blade* rocks.

LEGACY: Guillermo Del Toro directed *Blade 2* in 2002, a sequel that many agreed was superior to the original *Blade*. *Blade: Trinity* (2004), an underwhelming sequel pitting the Daywalker against a Euro-Trash version of Dracula (Dominic Purcell), followed. After that box office disappointment, *Blade* transitioned to television, and the Spike Network for a short-lived series, *Blade: The Series* in 2005-2006. It was canceled after a handful of episodes, and did not star Snipes. Snipes himself, as late as 2011, has suggested a *Blade 4*.

Bride of Chucky * * *

Critical Reception

"The Chucky films started anew with this film that, together with *Seed of Chucky*, make for two very fun horror films. The Chucky

series was always a little ridiculous to accept on face value but playing it up for some laughs in with the scares worked very nicely, and Jennifer Tilly is perfect in the title role. Recent horror series seem to work when they follow soap opera character lines rather than just remake their progenitor film time and time again, and the evolution of Chucky never got tired."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jennifer Tilly (Tiffany); Katherine Heigl (Jade); Nick Stabile (Jesse); John Ritter (Chief Warren Kincaid); Brad Dourif (Voice of Chucky); Alexis Arquette (Damien); Gordon Michael Woolvett (David); Lawrence Dane (Lt. Preston); Michael Johnson (Norton); Janet Kidder (Diane); Vincent Covazza (Bailey).

CREW: Universal Pictures Presents a David Kirschner Production, a Ronny Yu Film. *Casting:* Joanna Colbert, Ross Clydesdale. *Costume Designer:* Lynne Mackay. *Opening Title Song Performed by:* Rob Zombie. *Music:* Graeme Revell. *Chucky and Tiffany Dolls Created by:* David Kirschner. *Based on characters created by:* Don Mancini. *Chucky and Tiffany Doll Puppet Effects Created by:* Kevin Yagher. *Film Editors:* David Wu, Randolph K Bricker. *Production Designer:* Alicia Keywan. *Executive Producers:* Don Mancini, Corey Sienega. *Produced by:* David Kirschner, Grace Gilroy. *Written by:* Don Mancini. *Directed by:* Ronny Yu. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 89 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Tiffany (Tilly), the former girlfriend of Chicago serial killer, Charles Lee Ray (Dourif), locates and acquires the corpse of Chucky. She brings the Good Guys doll back to life, but after a lover's spat, Chucky moves Tiffany's soul into a doll too. The two dolls can reverse the curse by acquiring the Heart of Damballa Pendant left in Chucky's grave in Hoboken, New Jersey, and they begin a long trek to retrieve it, hitching a ride with two romantically-involved teens, Jade (Heigl) and Jesse (Stabile).



Tiffany (Jennifer Tilly) consults *Voodoo for Dummies* to resurrect Chucky (Brad Dourif) in *Bride of Chucky* (1998).

COMMENTARY: The long-in-the-tooth *Child's Play* franchise gets a new lease on life in the post- *Scream* horror milieu of the late 1990s with the unexpectedly funny, unexpectedly raunchy *Bride of Chucky*. This sequel is a movie-reference-aminute horror comedy that features at least two major inspirations.

The first such inspiration is a new character named Tiffany, played by Jennifer Tilly. A romantic if murderous girl at heart, Tiffany has waited ten long years for her beloved Chucky to return. In the course of the movie, she becomes a living doll herself, and thus the

perfect foil for Chucky. For the first time, Chucky must contend with an equal, and it's quite a sight to see the maniacal doll in the role of "loving" boyfriend. Tilly really gets into the spirit of the movie too, both in her performance as the human Tiffany, and in her voicing of the doll. She's a great addition to the cast.

Secondly, *Bride of Chucky* boasts a surprisingly elegant narrative structure. The screenplay bounces one young, naïve romantic couple (teenagers Jade and Jess) against the cynical, murderous romantic couple of Chucky and Tiffany. Essentially, they're mirror images, and the movie gets tremendous mileage out of this idea.

Because it was made post-*Scream*, *Bride of Chucky* is packed with horrrormovie references. The opening of the movie, set at "Lockport Evidence Depository," offers glimpses of Freddy Krueger's glove (finger-knives) and the masks belonging to Michael Meyers and Jason Voorhees ... all in lockers for unsolved crimes.

Even better, *Bride of Chucky* adopts *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) as its spiritual heir and central leitmotif, particularly the line of dialogue "we belong dead," which we hear uttered in the Whale film. Later, Tiffany draws the comparison between the Monsters' situation and hers, and repeats the line.

Bride of Chucky also daringly goes where no Chucky movie has gone before: into the bedroom.

In the film's most audacious scene, the dolls disrobe and get it on. "I'm starting to feel like Pinocchio here," Chucky quips. And before you know it, two plastic dollars are humping in silhouette (but only after Tiffany asks whether Chucky has a condom). This is patently ridiculous of course, but *Bride of Chucky* has a sense of unfettered freedom about it, evidencing a lot more ingenuity and energy than some of the previous entries in the series.

The movie's clever dialogue also makes note of the narrative gymnastics required to keep a franchise like this going year after year. When recounting his story, for instance, Chucky notes "if it was a movie, it would take three or four sequels to do it justice." And one of his final lines is among his best ever.

"I always come back. But dying is such a bitch."

***Children of the Corn V:
Fields of Terror* * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Stacy Galina (Allison); Alexis Arquette (Greg); Adam Wylie (Ezekial); Greg Vaughan (Tyrus); Eva Mendez (Kir); Ahmet Zappa (Laszlo); Angela Jones (Charlotte); Olivia Burnette (Lilly); Aaron Jackson (Zane); Fred Williamson (Sheriff Skaggs); David Carradine (Luke); Matthew Tait (Jared); Kane Hodder (Bartender); Season Hubley (Lilly's Mother); Edward Edwards (Lilly's Father); Frank Lloyd (Deputy Earl); Hiro Koda (Caleb); Jennifer Badger (Judith).

CREW: Dimension Films Presents a Blue Rider Production, an Ethan Wiley Film. *Casting:* Ed Mitchell and Robyn Ray. *Production Designers:* Deborah Raymond, Dorian Vernacchio. *Music:* Paul Rabjohns. *Film Editor:* Peter Flanagan. *Director of Photography:* David Lewis. *Line Producer:* Jo Ann May-Pavey. *Executive Producer:* Jeffrey Kurz. *Based on a Short Story by:* Stephen King. *Produced by:* Jeff Geoffray, Walter Josten. *Written and directed by:* Ethan Wiley. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 83 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of four college students are run off the road in Divinity Fields, unaware that they are at the mercy of a religious cult of youngsters worshipping He Who Walks Behind the Rows. One of the girls, Allison (Galina), realizes that her brother Jacob is living in the cult and attempts to rescue him before he turns eighteen and must be sacrificed to the evil demon. Another girl, Kir (Mendez), comes to realize that she belongs at the cult and offers herself up for sacrifice. All this occurs under the watchful eye of cult leader (and adult) Luke (Carradine).

COMMENTARY: The fifth film in the *Children of the Corn* series, the DTV *Fields of Terror*, picks up on two 1990s trends, one from horror films, and one from real—and quite horrific—events in the culture.

First, *Fields of Terror* is the one and only *Children of the Corn* movie to pit hip, pop-culture literate teenagers against He Who Walks Behind the Rows and his followers. This is done in shameless imitation of the then-popular teen slasher trend exemplified by such hits as *Scream* (1996), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) and *Urban Legend* (1998). In keeping with those box-office successes, the teens here are

sassy, irreverent and extremely good-looking. They are also prone to wise-cracking.

In terms of current events, this horror movie involves a cult ... and cults were a huge matter in America of the 1990s. In 1993, David Koresh, leader of the Branch-Davidian religious sect, became involved in a fatal stand-off with Federal authorities. Seventy-five Branch-Davidian cult members (including over twenty children) died in a blaze during the raid on April 19, 1993.

In 1997, another cult grabbed news headlines. This time, the leader was Marshall Applewhite (1931–1997) and at his Heaven's Gate cult in California. He urged the mass suicide of 39 followers so that they could depart the physical realm and board a spaceship he believed was trailing the Hale-Bop Comet. On March 26, 1997, the corpses of his followers were discovered by the authorities.

In *Fields of Terror*, David Carradine's Luke is more Koresh than Applewhite, a so-called "prophet" leading his mesmerized people in worship of the all-too-real He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

That's just one unusual element of the *Children of the Corn* movies: the message about cults is always muddled. It's clear from the films that the cults are evil, but it is also clear that He Who Walks Behind the Rows is a legitimate supernatural force, and, well, it's just natural that some people—upon discovering the existence of such a power—would come to worship it.

That established, in some meager way, *Fields of Terror* gazes at the reasons why people turn to religion: child abuse, abandonment, feelings of grief, and powerlessness. It would be easier to buy into such concepts if He Who Walks Behind the Rows weren't real, and if the movie didn't suffer from a cheap ending that suggests evil is actually genetic: a green flame passed from generation to generation.

Also difficult to believe is the scene in which lovely Eva Mendez, as Kir, is so taken with the cult (and so unhappy in her life) that she willingly sacrifices herself. Suicidal tendencies don't exist in a vacuum. If Kir were that unhappy, she would not wear such nice clothes, apply such make-up and have carefully-coiffed hair. In other words, she would show outward signs that she planned to "give up" on life. None of those clues exist here, which makes Kir's death scene seem particularly arbitrary. She just steps into a silo and falls into the fire. That's the kind of death that a horror movie needs to earn, and *Fields of Terror* never does so.

***Curse of the Puppet Master* * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: George Peck (Dr. Magrew); Emily Harrison (Jane); Josh Green (Robert); Michael Guerin (Joey); Robert Donavan (Sheriff Garvey); Michael Sollenberger (Gas Station Owner); Marc Newberger (Art); Jason-Shane Scott (Deputy Wayburn); Scott Bayer (Larry); William Knight (Medical Examiner); Pat Thomas (Shipping Agent).

CREW: Full Moon Entertainment presents a film by Victoria Sloan. *Casting:* Robert MacDonald, Perry Bullington. *Special Puppet Effects:* Mark Rappaport. *Creature Effects, Special Visual Effects:* Digital Armageddon. *Special Make-up Effects:* Mark Williams. *Costume Designer:* Judi Jensen. *Art Director:* Dani Michaeli. *Production Designer:* Allison Shavitz. *Music:* Richard Band, Jeff Walter. *Film Editor:* J.R. Bookwalter. *Director of Photography:* Howard Wexler. *Executive Producer:* Charles Band. *Written by:* Benjamin Carr. *Produced by:* Kirk Edward Hansen. *Directed by:* Victoria Sloan. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 75 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Andre Toulon's puppets—Pinhead, Blade, Six Shooter, the Leech Woman, Jester and Tunneler—are now in the possession of evil puppet maker Dr. Magrew (Peck), a man dedicated to moving a human soul into a puppet. Magrew hires a simpleton whittler nicknamed "Tank" (Green), and hopes to use him in his experiments. Meanwhile, Magrew's daughter (Jane) falls in love with Tank, who grows increasingly plagued by nightmares that he is destined to become a real-life puppet.

COMMENTARY: Charles Band's *Puppet Master* films hit their nadir with this underwhelming sixth entry in the series, the aptly-titled *Curse of the Puppet Master*. The performances are subpar even by *Puppet Master* standards, the puppets don't move with the same grace and believability as in previous entries, and the movie ends on a dime, without really resolving anything in terms of its narrative. But most damagingly, *Curse of the Puppet Master* ditches series continuity and

story arc in favor of new characters and situations that are remarkably uninteresting and actually baffling.

Although Gordon Currie's Rick Myers was not the most charismatic character to appear in the franchise, the last two movies in the franchise went to great pains to establish him as the new, 1990s puppet master. Those movies introduced not just Myers and his role, but the puppet war against the evil God, Sutekh, and the Biotech artificial intelligence gambit "The Omega Project." Furthermore, the last two films positioned Toulon as a sort of guiding spirit to Rick in the Bodega Bay Inn and repeatedly referred to the upcoming battle with evil.

All that material is gone in *Curse of the Puppet Master*. Rick Myers is nowhere to be found and is not mentioned in the film. Instead, this film opens with the Toulon puppets in the possession of the evil Dr. Magrew. He claims to have acquired Blade, Jester, Pinhead and the others at an auction "years ago."

Just attempt to imagine any circumstance by which Rick Myers—new puppet master and all— would auction off the very puppets that saved his life on numerous occasions.

If one assumes that Rick Myers is dead, it logically follows that Toulon's puppets would also be dead or at least in the property of Sutekh, given the "great war" between good and evil. But the whole set-up for this movie simply ignores previous entries in the *Puppet Master* series.

It's certainly understandable that the filmmakers in the *Puppet Master* series would want to move in a new direction, but there should at least be a genuflection to the fact that this shift has occurred. If we had learned, for instance, that Myers went into hiding and sent the puppets away, into Dr. Magrew's care so Sutekh wouldn't find them.

Any sort of explanation would have been preferable to nothing. The bottom line is that *Puppet Master* films are not that good or interesting on their own, shorn of the inter-movie continuity, which tell the history of Toulon and his puppets. Remove that, and—again—this is just a very, very low-grade *Friday the 13th* film, with murderous puppets instead of a masked slasher.

Also, there's never been a movie that ended as abruptly as *Curse of the Puppet Master*. Tank gets transformed into a puppet tank, the puppets murder Dr. Magrew, Jane enters the scene, sees Tank as a puppet, and screams. Cut to credits.

That's it.

The movie actually ends mid-scream. Not that you want the

movie to last much longer (heaven help us all...), it's just that you want some closure to the narrative. Will Tank kill himself or remain a puppet? What will become of Toulon's puppets? Jane?

It's as though the movie has realized, by its end point, that this is a disposable entry and so— acutely aware these characters and situations will never re-appear—just cuts its losses.

You should do likewise and skip right to *Retro Puppet Master*, which returns to the story of Toulon and forgets all about this unsatisfactory one-off.

***Death Mask* * * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: James Best (Wilbur Johnson); Linnea Quigley (Angel); John Nutten (Guido); Brigitte Hill (Zerenda); Diane Cantrell (Dawn); Robin Krasny (Louise); Cynthia Beckert (Cindy); Lorilyn Alexander (Hattie); Tommy Gerrard (Critic); Coni Causey (Madame Rose); Mela Levin (Lavern); Tracey Tepper (Mandy); Tom Ferguson (Clown/ Wilbur's Father); Mike Gaughan (Detective); Bill Roberts (Policeman); Gersh Morningstar (Barker); Jonathan Osteen (Young Wilbur); Bernie Fidlo (Geek).

CREW: James Best Presents a Best Friend Films Production of a Steve Latshaw Film. *Director of Photography:* Maxwell J. Beck. *Film Editor:* Pete Opatowsky. *Music:* Michael Parnell. *Executive Producer:* Dorothy Collier Best. *Produced by:* James Best. *Written by:* James Best. *Directed by:* Steve Latshaw. *MPAA Rating:* NR. *Running time:* 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A scarred, kindly but despised carnie, Wilbur Johnson (James Best), goes with his only friend, the stripper Angel (Quigley), to visit an old Swamp Woman, Zerenda (Hill), after being fired from his post at the carnival by the evil boss, Guido (Nutten). The old witch grants Johnson, at the price of his soul itself, the ability to create a true work of art. Later, Wilbur carves a death mask out of the wood of an old hanging tree and creates a devilish, murderous "soulless"

monster in the process. While wearing the evil mask, Wilbur wreaks bloody vengeance against his enemies.

COMMENTARY: Although technically lacking, and shot entirely in uninspired fashion, the direct-to-video *Death Mask* is strangely endearing. Perhaps this is because of veteran actor James Best's presence in the lead role. He's a good actor, he's the author of the screenplay, and Best brings an authentic sense of pathos to the role of scarred carnie Wilbur Johnson. This is a man who has never gotten a fair break. As a child, his alcoholic father disfigured him by pressing his face against a hot stove. And as an adult, Wilbur has hardly known friendship or the love of a woman. His art—his carvings—are all about ugliness because that's all he's ever seen of the world.

In the great tradition of the classic monster movies, Wilbur is a monster that audiences feel sorry for, identify with, and ultimately come to love. He has acted rashly (selling his soul to create something of beauty), he has shown pride (in his refusal to destroy the death mask), and Wilbur certainly commits terrible crimes: the murder of a prostitute named Louise, and of Guido too, the carnival's horny and unfaithful boss, who is cheating on lovely Angel.

Death Mask features many scenes that involve James Best as Wilbur and Linnea Quigley (as Angel) simply discussing things, talking about life, about childhood dreams that didn't come true, or dreams of the future that are also in vain. They take a trip to the swamp, just the two of them, and there's this teasing, natural heartfelt affection between the two performers that shines through in the characters.

Angel, far from being a floozy, is a real golden heart, and she is the only person in the world who has ever been good to Wilbur. For his part, Wilbur loves Angel and dreams of being with her, even as she dates the reprehensible but attractive Guido.

Death Mask even ends with Wilbur's wish vocalized, just as he is dying. He asks Angel if he were younger, could she ever have loved him. Her tragic answer as she cradles him: She *did* love him.

Forget about the carnival stock footage in *Death Mask*. Put aside the general cheapness of the entire enterprise. Let go of the narrative diffidence and the lurid quality of some sequences. What you get in this direct-to-video movie is a distinctive throwback to horror yesteryear: a time when the monsters and the leading ladies had "heart," and marched tragically towards their sad fates. It may not be art, but it has heart, and James Best and Linnea Quigley are great in

this movie. I never thought I'd write those words about Quigley. After a while, what might be mistaken for a performer's awkwardness comes through as something else entirely: individuality, quirkiness and personality.

Perhaps *Death Mask* is also a throwback to cheap-o carnival movies such as *Carnival of Blood* (1972) and Ray Dennis Steckler's *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies!!?* The movie offers us bulbous-eyed geeks eating live chickens, fat fortune tellers, sleazy strippers, strongmen and other offthe-shelf representatives of the subgenre, but the movie's heart is more deeply attuned to the characters than to the carnivalesque.

In traditional, objective terms, *Death Mask* isn't a very good movie. The last half of the movie is repetitive and dull and scenes come out of nowhere (particularly the moment during which Wilbur, wearing the death mask, blows up a redneck's pick-up truck). Some of the editing is pretty bad, particularly an early montage which features all the film's gory highlights, and you know the movie is pandering when, just forty-eight seconds in, we get a lingering nude scene with Quigley in the shower.

Despite all this, Best and Quigley maintain their dignity and more. They actually create two fairly memorable, interesting characters whom audiences come to care about. That was about the last thing I expected from a direct-to-video movie called *Death Mask*.

Deep Rising * * 1/2

Critical Reception

"This film has a terrific climax, in which a terrifying, Cthulhu-inspired squid monster is fully revealed. Unfortunately, the first half of the picture is awkwardly directed and deafeningly noisy as the soundtrack is filled with never-ending rapid gunfire."—Charles P. Mitchell, *The Complete H.P. Lovecraft Filmography*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001, page 16

"... a modern B-movie that delights audiences with a simple plot and stunning special effects."—Mark Wilshin, *A Cinematic*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Treat Williams (Finnegan); Famke Janssen (Trillian); Anthony Heald (Canton); Kevin J. O'Connor (Joey Pantucci); Wes Studi (Hanover); Derrick O'Connor (Captain Atherton); Djimon Hounsou (Vivo); Una Damon (Leila); Jason Flemyng (Mulligan); Cliff Curtis (Mamooli); Clifton Powell (Mason); Trevor Goddard (T-Ray); Clint Curtis (Billy); Warren Takeuchi (Radar Operator); Linden Banks (Communications Officer).

CREW: Calimari Productions, Cinergi Pictures Entertainment and Hollywood Pictures present a Stephen Sommers film. *Casting:* Mary Goldberg. *Music:* Jerry Goldsmith. *Creature Design:* Rob Bottin. *Film Editors:* Bob Ducsey, John Wright. *Production Designer:* Holger Gross. *Director of Photography:* Howard Atherton. *Produced by:* Laurence Mark, John Baldecchi. *Written and directed by:* Stephen Sommers. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 107 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A salvage boat carrying mercenaries and captained by Finnegan (Williams) rendezvous with a state-of-the-art luxury liner, the *Argonautica*, dead in the water in the South Pacific, eight hundred miles from land. The mercenaries' robbery, as well as that planned by the cunning but beautiful thief, Trillian (Janssen), is thwarted by the presence on the ship of a giant, hungry sea monster. It has devoured the bulk of the ship's passengers and crew. But this multi-headed, tentacled monster doesn't just kill its victims: it sucks the fluids from the human body, drinking people alive and then discarding the skeleton. Finnegan and Trillian team up to repair Finnegan's damaged salvage boat and escape from the *Argonautica*.

COMMENTARY: Essentially *Tremors* (1990) meets *The Poseidon Adventure* (1971), Stephen Sommers' *Deep Rising* is a rip-roaring monster movie with a surfeit of visual style, elaborate CGI effects, and even a subtext about the roaring nineties spiraling to an unpleasant end. Unfortunately, the film is hampered to a degree by some banal dialogue ("I've got a really bad feeling about this") and an overall lack of depth.

Furthermore, after a strong start, the film ends in predictable chases, predictable explosions and predictable survivors. This was a typical flaw of late 1990s Hollywood product, especially in the blockbuster action genre: after an hour-and-a-half of trying repeatedly to top itself, many films, including *Deep Rising*, simply can't achieve any more, even with their big budgets and effects, because some traditional pillars like a good script and compelling characters are missing.

Deep Rising must be the zillionth film of the 1990s to feature heroes outracing a blossoming fireball (here on a jet-ski), and so the film's last act boasts a feeling of clichéd convention, not inspiration.

Still, *Deep Rising* works pretty well for most of its running time. In part this is because the screenwriter, Sommers, has created a truly grotesque and interesting monster, a gigantic, mutated sea creature that sucks all the fluids from the human body and then excretes the skeletal remains (think John Voight in *Anaconda* [1997]). Several corpses in the film are depicted halfdrained of fluid yet still alive and this disposition indeed looks like a fate worse than death. The creature also bends metal walls like aluminum foil, and one scene takes the protagonists to a chamber of horrors where the monster has left behind, literally, hundreds of "used up" human corpses. This feeding ground is a disgusting, impressive vision that traditional mechanical effects could never have achieved on such an epic scale. CGI, though not always successful, certainly gave new life to the monster movie genre in the 1990s.

Deep Rising couples the notion of this vampiric sea monster from the depths (sucking the fluid from the human form) with a critique of out-of-control business practices in the late- 1990s. The years 1995–2000 represent the era of the too good to be true, soon-to-burst (in March 2000) "dot-com boom," and Americans were feeling so confident about low-unemployment, low inflation, a 60 percent stock market rise, and the third longest-period of sustained growth since World War II that a dazzled Congress began to systematically dismantle regulations and safeguards that had protected consumers from financial institutions since the Great Depression.

In late 1999, for instance, the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act repealed the Banking Act of 1933 (also known as Glass-Steagall), which had successfully prohibited banks from owning other financial institutions. In other words, the corporations were in control in the United States during Clinton's second term, sucking "liquidity" from the middle class with new, byzantine investments, not entirely unlike *Deep Rising's* sea monster.

Specifically, *Deep Rising* involves the maiden voyage of 487-million-dollar cruise ship called the *Argonautica*, which is exclusively the playground of the ultra rich in America. Early in the film, there's a champagne, fancy dress party in the ship's ballroom and the vessel's financier and builder, Canton (Heald), toasts "Good Times Forever," to the haves and have-mores. He also notes the ship's luxurious purpose is to "make dreams come true."

Of course, Canton is blatantly dishonest and a double-dealer. At the same time that he sold the cruise and the wonders of his new ship to his wealthy passengers, he simultaneously bet against it. He claims he "misjudged the market" and it was more efficient for him to scuttle the ship and get the insurance money for it than keep it running.



Aboard the state-of-the-art cruise ship *Argonautica*, thief Trillian (Famke Janssen, left) and ship's captain John Finnegan (Treat Williams) face a sea monster in *Deep Rising* (1998).

Late in the 2000s, Americans would come to understand that, left to their own devices after the roaring 1990s, financial institutions such as Goldman-Sachs were essentially doing the same thing: selling stocks to customers and placing bets against those stocks at the same time.

The dot-com boom was also known as the "Internet Boom" in some circles because much new wealth was being generated by the technology of the Net. However, Americans at the same time, had suspicions about the new technology of the net and the high-technology in general.

By 1998, many productions on TV and film were evidencing fear

of a manmade apocalypse around the corner: Y2K (or "The Millennium Bug"). The fear was that computers everywhere— from banks to government—would stop running at one minute after midnight on January 1, 2000, because of a programming error that could not account for the rollover from the year 1999 to 2000 (or rather, 99 to 00).

This fear also finds voice in *Deep Rising*. The wealthy customers and the crew of the *Argonautica* believe that their technology insulates them from danger, even alone and adrift on the high seas. They learn the painful way that this is a false security, and that nature trumps technology. Even the most high-tech cruise-ship in creation cannot survive infiltration by the sea monster.

The problem with *Deep Rising* is that a lot of the dialogue feels like it was ripped off from *Star Wars* (1977). I'm not just talking about the line about "having a bad feeling," but also Trillian's line to Williams' Han Solo—knock off questioning if that "heap of junk is your boat."

This may be intentional homage, but it doesn't feel like authentic characterization. Also, the scenes in which the surviving soldiers and mercenaries traverse the scuttled ship play, almost exactly, like moments from *Alien Resurrection* (1997). It's hard to deny, either, that after a while, the movie's metallic blue palette grows tiresome and one starts to long for more human, natural-seeming environs.

By the time that the film does settle down at that locale, a mysterious island, the audience is asked to believe that a character thought to be dead has also miraculously survived, and countenance also a blatant hook for a sequel.

If the script had been better, the characters less off-the-shelf, then these moments might have felt like the glorious excesses of a confident rollercoaster ride. Instead, because action and explosions have substituted for narrative, these moments play as desperate and craven.

That established, *Deep Rising* is worlds better than a similarly-themed film involving a damaged ship and scavengers, 1999's *Virus*.

So *Deep Rising* is the shipwreck/monstermovie of the 1990s to see, even if it is not exactly great. It features a great monster, a great setting, an interesting subtext about "the good times," plus good actors.

If only it had a decent script that didn't come down to, ultimately, jet-skis and fireballs.

Devil in the Flesh * *¹/₂

Cast and Crew

CAST: Rose McGowan (Debbie); Alex McArthur (Peter Rinaldi); Phil Morris (Detective Joe Rosales); Robert Silver (Detective Phil Archer); Peg Shirley (Fiona); Julia Nickson (Anna Nakashi); Rick Overton (Dr. Milleston); J.C. Brandy (Janie Magray); Sherrie Rose (Marilyn); Wendy Robie (Joyce Saunders); Ryan Biffle (Greg Straffer); Krissy Carlson (Meegan); Milton James (Mr. Monsour).

CREW: Le Monde Entertainment Inc. presents in association with Unapix Entertainment Inc. and Prostar Entertainment Inc. a Kurt Anderson production of a Steve Cohen film. *CASTING:* Aaron Griffith. *PRODUCTION DESIGNER:* Radha Metha. *DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:* Joseph Montgomery. *MUSIC:* Michael Burns, Steve Gorevitch. *FILM EDITOR:* Michael Thibault. *LINE PRODUCER:* Betsy Mackey. *ASSOCIATE PRODUCER:* Alicia Reilly Laron, Marc Forby. *PRODUCED BY:* Richard Brandes, Kurt Anderson. *STORY BY:* Richard Brandes, Kurt Anderson. *WRITTEN BY:* Michael Michard, Kelly Carlin McCall, Robert McCall and Steve Cohen. *DIRECTED BY:* Steve Cohen. *MPAA RATING:* R. *RUNNING TIME:* 92 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After a suspicious fire burns down her home and kills her mom, young Debbie (Mc-Gowan) moves into the household of her biblethumping grandmother. As she sets her sights on her creative writing teacher, Peter (McArthur), police detectives investigate Debbie's role in the fire. Soon, Debbie is taking out her competition for Peter's affections, including fellow students and even his girlfriend.

COMMENTARY: The 1990s cough up yet another interloper film in *Devil in the Flesh*, a film that is at its seamy best when relying on characterizations and intrigue, and its worst when focusing on action.

On the last front, the film's final confrontation is poorly shot and edited. Excessive use of slow-motion photography reveals inefficient stunt work and a less-than-lethal-appearing final tussle.

But leading up to that not-so-great finale is a fun, lurid spin on

the interloper paradigm. Here, a teenage girl named Debbie (a smoldering Rose McGowan) moves into her grandmother's home and attends a new school, where she immediately sets her seductive sights on a creative writing professor Peter (McArthur).

While Peter doesn't have sex with the underage girl, he certainly does leer at the nubile youngster. When Debbie delivers an apple to teacher, she's not just a would-be Lolita, she's also playing the serpent, the "devil of the flesh," if not the devil in the flesh.

In accordance with interloper form, Debbie intervenes in her prey's love life, intercepting messages on his answering machine from his girlfriend. She takes out competitors too, pushing another school-girl, Meegan (Carlson), down a flight of stairs. Before long, she's performing the interloper's ubiquitous "wardrobe malfunction," skulking around in the teacher's clothes in his closet, and threatening his professional standing. Debbie sends Peter flowers at school, and he's called on the carpet by his high-school principal for appearing to have an inappropriate relationship with a minor.

Once more, the real horror evoked is of personal boundaries being trampled by a usurper, a stranger who will stop at nothing to insinuate herself into your life. Rose McGowan makes for a seductive and disarming interloper in *Devil in the Flesh*, and what makes Debbie especially interesting is the way the film positions draconian religious beliefs (particularly from Christianity) as at least a partial impetus of her anti-social behaviors.

Debbie's grandmother is quite cruel to Debbie, telling her that all she needs after the death of her mom is a "good Christian household" and that she "should be grateful for the gifts God" has given her. Society seems to be sending the same heartless message. "Who is behind sex, drugs and rock-and-roll, but Satan himself !" declares a televangelist, worried about idle hands.

In response to all this, Debbie beats her grandmother to death and says, "You never showed mercy. My mother never showed mercy. So now I won't ... it's a family thing." Stern Christianity, without the compassion of Jesus, suggests the movie, is the very thing that could create a "devil in the flesh."

After an interesting first act depicting Debbie's home life with Grandma and her growing and dangerous infatuation with Peter, *Devil in the Flesh* starts to descend into a campier tone. After killing an aggressive suitor with a ski pole, Debbie quips, "No means no. Don't you guys understand that?" And finally, it seems awfully convenient the way so many characters conveniently show up at Grandma's house so Debbie can knock them off without interference.

Devil in the Flesh ends with a freeze frame on Debbie's youthful, disturbed face, and that's a good image to go out on. What we see here is a twisted kid who, because of her religious indoctrination, turned the tables on her family (mother first, then grandmother). That's the heart of this particular interloper story, and one just wishes it could have been told with a bit more skill.

As Peter notes at one point, "nothing about this girl is simple," and it would have been terrific if *Devil in the Flesh* complemented Debbie's complex (and ultimately sympathetic) psychology with some of its own.

***Die Hard Dracula* ¹/₂ (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bruce Glover (Van Helsing); Danny Sachen (Steven Hillman); Kerry Dustin (Carla/ Julia); Nathalie Huot (Dana); Ernest Garcia, Chabu Hrotko, Tom McGowan (Dracula); Talia Botone (Sonia); Peter Horak (Baker Fulsa); John Slavik (Dentist Hoble); Robert Coppola (Pub Owner Ivan); Ewald Eisele (Father Stanislav); Chaba Hrotko (Policeman Gabor); Joseph Miksoursky (Mr. Hillman); Maggie Windish (Mrs. Hillman); Mara Racz (Mrs. Fulsa); Ross Hawkins (Blacksmith); Chaba Hrotko (King Ludwig); Alex Vital (Blind Man); Carlos Lopez (Warrior); Rick Lunding (King's Guard #1); Valerie Katamadzi (King's Guard); Art Vannell (Voice of Dracula).

CREW: Peter Horak Productions Presents *Die Hard Dracula*.
Director of Photography: Mark Morris. *Film Editor:* David Avallone.
Music: Ivan Koutikov. *Associate Producers:* Bruce Glover, Kristy L. Moore. *Co-Producer:* Mark H.L. Morris. *Written, produced and directed by:* Peter Horak. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 88 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After his girlfriend Julia (Dustin) drowns in a water-skiing incident, American Steve Hillman (Sachen) travels to Eastern Europe. There, at an inn, he meets Carla (Dustin), a deadringer for his lost love, and runs into Dr. Van Helsing (Glover), who is hunting vampires in the region. Before long, Count Dracula himself (Mc-Gowen, Garcia,

Hrotko) is hunting Carla, and transforming her friends into vampires, including Dana (Huot). Van Helsing and Steve attempt to destroy Dracula in his castle, but the fact that he has a "loose" heart makes staking the count difficult.

COMMENTARY: With movies such as *Die Hard Dracula*, it's hard to know where to begin a review. Should I start with the fact that this movie has nothing to do with the *Die Hard* aesthetic, at least as general audiences understand it in terms of that action franchise? That there's no managainst-villain-in-a-contained-environment scenario, or the accompanying tension we associate with *Die Hard* (1987), *Die Hard 2* (1990) or *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (1995)? Rather, this is but a free-ranging vampire movie with the movie's "garlic league" undead-hunters attempting to battle Dracula in barns, in his castle, and at the local inn.

Or perhaps I could start with the fact that Dracula is played by three different actors in the film, and voiced by a fourth. This isn't an intentional conceit: it's just that, for some calamitous reason, three actors were apparently necessary to complete the film. As a result, the Count appears markedly different from scene-to-scene and at his chubby worst resembles Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia more than Bela Lugosi or Christopher Lee.

Or perhaps I could comment on *Die Hard Dracula's* wince-inducing attempts to add humor to the proceedings? After Dracula's coffin takes off and flies to a new castle (an act depicted with dreadful CGI), we hear his disembodied voice rumble, "I hate traveling."

Later, he meets lovely Dana on the shore of a babbling brook and moves in for the kill by distracting

her with the line: "what are those two marks on your neck?" Naturally, she feels her neck in panic, giving Dracula the opening to attack her.

Die Hard Dracula is clearly aiming for "funny" but it only hits the target marked "stupid."

Another example: Dr. Van Helsing arrives at the inn and tells his friends there that "there are many strange men in this world," and that the guest at another table (Dracula) is "one of them." Could Dr. Van Helsing know of Dracula's undead nature because he is exceptionally clever? Or because of his experience with vampires?

Or could it be the fact that Dracula is decked out in sun-glasses,

bright-red-lipstick, and his fangs are readily apparent, even from a distance?

Die Hard Dracula appears to have been shot on videotape, features performances that are, generously-speaking, absolutely terrible, and lingers on bad music video montages (like Julia's waterskiing moment). It's an insult to Dracula, horror movies, and the audience's intelligence.

Early in the film, Van Helsing boasts that he can smell a "vampire a mile away." That's just the stink of the movie, actually.

***Disturbing Behavior* * * ***

Critical Reception

"... fitfully offers clever satire on the teen caste system and on adults' concern that theirs are hanging with 'the wrong crowd.' ... The real problem, though, is that Nutter and Rosenberg's welcome commentary on the cult of child therapy never develops any real teeth. We never get into the minds of parents who long for the sort of ideal family they've seen on TV."—Noel Murray, *The Nashville Scene*, " *Disturbing Behavior*," August 3, 1998

"Though *Disturbing Behavior* uses *The Stepford Wives* as a template (they ought to pay royalties), it doesn't tap into anything horrible. The villain isn't even scary, because he doesn't have a reason for wanting to make bad high-school kids into zombie-like good ones. It's like *Stepford Wives* without the family tension."— Stacey Richter, *Tucson Weekly*, "*Disturbing Behavior*." August 3, 1998

Cast and Crew

CAST: James Marsden (Steve); Katie Holmes (Rachel); Nick Stahl (Gavin Strick); Steve Railsback (Officer Cox); Bruce Greenwood (Edgar Caldicott); Katharine Isabelle(Lindsay Clarke); Chris Owens (Officer

Kramer); Ethan Embry (Allan Clarke); Chad E. Donella (UV); Brendan Fehr (Brendan); Crystal Cass (Lorna Langley); Sarah-Jane Redmond (Miss Perkins); William Sadler (Dorian).

CREW: MGM Presents in association with Village Roadshow and Beacon Communications a David Nutter film. *Casting:* Lisa Beach. *Music:* Mark Snow. *Production Designer:* Trish Keating. *Film Editor:* Randy John Morgan. *Director of Photography:* John S. Bartleby. *Produced by:* Armyan Bernstein. *Written by:* Scott Rosenberg. *Directed by:* David Nutter. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 84 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The new kid in school, Steve (Marsden), begins to sense something strange about his fellow students at Crescent High in Cradle Bay. One clique, the Blue Ribbons, seems to dominate and lord it over everyone else. And once indoctrinated into the Blue Ribbons, regular students begin to act oddly ... as if brainwashed. Steve uncovers a conspiracy orchestrated by a skillful doctor, Caldicot (Greenwood), one involving behavioral modification implants.

COMMENTARY: As I've enumerated elsewhere in this book, the teen culture of the 1990s had some issues. The Spur Posse, the dead baby at the prom, the school shootings, and so forth.

A centrist by necessity after 1994's mid-term electoral catastrophe, President Clinton found the sweet spot in the middle class by catering (or perhaps pandering) to the worried "soccer mom" crowd.

In particular, President Clinton came out in favor of school uniforms and more than that too. In the Telecommunications Act of 1996, signed into law by Clinton in February of that election year, Title V was called "The Communications Decency Act of 1996." It proposed, among other things, restrictions on Internet language and free speech. More importantly, an added provision included the introduction of "V-Chip," a device that was to be included in all new televisions by the year 2000.

The V-Chip ("v" is for violence) was a device that could be utilized by parents to block certain TV entertainments from their children's virgin eyes. "If every parent uses this chip wisely, it can become a powerful voice against teen violence, teen pregnancy, teen drug use and for both learning and entertainment," Clinton

announced.⁷¹

Of course, cynics might have noted that careful parental monitoring of their children could achieve the job of the V-Chip without technology. Or that television sets already had three built-in, redundant contingencies for blocking programs. They were, in order: an off switch, a removable outlet plug, and a channel switcher or remote control. But no matter, the V-Chip was going to block harmful entertainments, and par-ents didn't have to manage it (at least not after initially programming it).



Gavin (Nick Stahl, center) catalyzes the Stepford teens in *Disturbing Behavior* (1998).

Given the development of the V-Chip, it was only a matter of time before a clever filmmaker suggested the next step in controlling children's behavior: moving the chip into the very brains of troubled teenagers so that the little buggers don't step out of line, behaviorally-speaking. In other words: *Stepford Kids*.

And in fact, that's precisely what *Disturbing Behavior* concerns, Stepford Children who, courtesy of neuro-implants, are programmed to behave in a conformist, parentally-accepted fashion.

In *Disturbing Behavior*, the parents are totally in league with plans to turn their children into "perfect" brainwashed automatons, just as husbands endorsed the replacement of their real wives for perfect artificial ones in *The Stepford Wives* (1974). The upshot for the parents: academic and athletic achievement, and again, they don't have to

exert themselves by disciplining their own kids. How perfect is that?

For the teens of *Disturbing Behavior*, of course, it's not nearly so perfect an arrangement. They see the programmed kids as being "lobotomized" and having lost their very individuality. The implant enforces political correctness and patriotism (as we see through nearly subliminal flashes), and these factors inhibit any teen's God given right: to experiment, to break free of parental expectations, and to build a sense of self that is independent of societal norms.



Rachel (Katie Holmes, left) witnesses a programming malfunction in jock Chug (A.J. Buckley) in *Disturbing Behavior*.

The movie has some fun with this idea, particularly in its choice of soundtrack, which features an all-out war between hard-rocking teen music of the 1990s and the music of the parents, represented in part by the works of Barry Manilow, and in one case Olivia Newton John's "Have You Ever Been Mellow."

Disturbing Behavior also functions more than adequately as an indictment of the "class" system in modern American, middle-class high schools. Here, the disenfranchised (motorheads, microgeeks, Skaters, etc.) are allied against the ruling body, which consists of football players and cheerleaders. The "Blue Ribbons" (the robotic athletes) get everything they want, and the rest are left to pick up crumbs from the tables. The Blue Ribbons get the girls, the power, the entitlement, and if you've ever attended high school, you know exactly

who these "robots" are.

The ultimate message of *Disturbing Behavior* seems to be that though "adolescence is a mine -field," it's one that everyone must navigate in their own unique fashion. Imposing conformity from above, via the V-Chip), and from government only makes ... lemmings.

In the film's final sequence we see the Pied Piper principle in reverse as a weapon against the implanted— *a sound wave device*— causes all the Blue Ribbons to go off the side of a cliff. Is that what parents really want for their children? Unthinking automatons? Is that the answer to school shootings and other problems in the culture?

Wallowing in conspiracy and science run amok, *Disturbing Behavior* proves less impressive than *The Stepford Wives* only in its choice of cast . On the surface, it's another horror movie cast with young, attractive, WB Network actors (like Katie Holmes) and featuring smart-alecky kids, just like in *Scream*. For many audiences, these aspects were enough to give *Disturbing Behavior* a miss. You can see the problem, right? How can your movie be a plug for individuality and a comment against conformity when it looks like every other teen movie of the decade, down to the underwear-model-quality young stars, down to the hip way of expressing itself?

This is a conundrum that *Disturbing Behavior* never quite overcomes.

The Faculty * * *

Critical Reception

"The special effects are used sparingly and are pleasantly unhokey, the terror is something less than total, there's plenty of occasions to wonder who the head alien is, and it all ends, thankfully, in nudity."—Jim Hanas, *Memphis Flyer*, "The Faculty," January 11, 1999

"Although *The Faculty* provides effective action set pieces, quite a few scary sneak-up scenes, and some good wiser-than-their-years repartee, its only subversive touch is its hep-cat

attitude towards drugs.... In the end, *Faculty* offers none of the unsettling half-closures or frame shattering outburst of FX and violence that mark the best of its chosen genre, but there is something cool about a mainstream, teen multiplex outing that identifies chemically altering consciousness as a fundamental part of being human."—Gary Dauphin, *The Village Voice*, January 5, 1999

Cast and Crew

CAST: Josh Hartnett (Zeke); Elijah Wood (Casey); Famke Janssen (Miss Burke); Robert Patrick (Coach Joe Willis); Clea DuVall (Stokely); Salma Hayek (Nurse Harper); Jordana Brewster (Delilah); Laura Harris (Marybeth); Shawn Hatossy (Stan Rosado); Piper Laurie (Ms. Olsen); Christopher McDonald (Mr. Connor); Bebe Neuwirth (Principal Drake); Usher Raymond (Gabe); Jon Stewart (Mr. Edward Furlong); Daniel Von Bargen (Mr. Tate).

CREW: Dimension Films presents a film by Robert Rodriguez.
Casting: Mary Vernieu, Anne McCarthy. *Make-up and Creature:* KNB.
Production Design: Cary White. *Film Editor:* Robert Rodriguez. *Executive Producers:* Bob and Harvey Weinstein. *Produced by:* Elizabeth Avellan.
Story by: David Wechter, Bruce Kimmel. *Written by:* Kevin Williamson.
Directed by: Robert Rodriguez. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 104 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A nerdy student named Casey (Wood) comes to the realization that the football coach and other teachers at his high school have become possessed by malevolent extra-terrestrials. Worse, they are converting and possessing the student body as well. Casey teams with the goth chick (DuVall), the popular girl (Brewster), the jock (Hatossy), the druggie (Hartnett) and the new girl (Harris) to stop the alien invasion. The only problem, it's hard to know whom to trust, not just because they are breaking high school clique barriers, but because an evil alien could be controlling any one of them.

COMMENTARY: "I always thought I was the only alien in high school," an adolescent remarks in the Kevin Williamson-scripted, Robert Rodriguez film, *The Faculty*. That witty comment gets to the

film's point: that high school can often feel to those enrolled in it like a bastion of unending conformity and rules. Teachers all drone on about getting kids ready for the "real world" like they're reading from the same rule book, and fellow students ostracize anyone who is too far afield from the norm. Even though there are "individual" groups like Goths, jocks, cheerleaders and druggies in high school, there's also rigid conformity within each.

The Faculty attempts to achieve for alien invasion movies what Kevin Williamson's *Scream* did for the slasher film. The movie offers a plethora of hip movie references to alien invasions past and current (to *Puppet Masters*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The X-Files*, and *Alien*, specifically), and at the same time it attempts to state something relevant and meaningful about 1990s teen culture.

In the tradition of *Halloween* (1978) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *The Faculty* utilizes the high school English class as vehicle through which the filmmakers express the movie's theme. Specifically, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is the topic of the day, and it concerns a castaway on an island.

The Faculty makes mention of Crusoe's fear of isolation and his fear that he would never get off that island. For many teens, this fear of isolation walks hand in hand with the fear that they will never escape high school, that the land of the jocks and cheerleaders and conformity will forever be a part of their existence. One young character cleverly states in the film, "I'm not an alien ... I'm just discontent" and that's a good way of describing the high school experience for many young people.

Enter the aliens of *The Faculty*, who promise something that parents and teachers cannot. "We can help you belong" an infected Delilah tells Casey, playing on the same fear explained in *Robinson Crusoe*, that of being alone, separate from the rest of humanity, of your peers. Of course, what the aliens really seem to be promising is slavery but this is their pitch. They come from a world, the Queen reports, without anger, where even the outcasts are loved.

The paranoia charted in *The Faculty* involves the fear of being different, of being the only human in a room full of aliens (or football players).

The cure to that paranoia, the film suggests, is in an acknowledgment of each individual's special gifts. The power to win comes from within. Each teenager in the film, from the druggie to the jock to the prom queen, gets to contribute something surprising and valuable to the resolution of the crisis and it's a reminder that, even when feeling isolated, students should not paint stereotypes of their

classmates.

The Faculty has a good heart and a good message behind its horror, even if it tries a little too hard to be hip and quirky, when—if told in simple straightforward fashion, the movie might have been more successful and more effective.

For instance, there's a campy quality to the alien-possessed teachers and staff, and that tends to undercut their menace and make them figures of fun. Additionally, it's hard to deny that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* tackled the high school milieu—and issues just like *The Faculty*—on a regular basis. And for the most part, it did a better job.

For a movie that has so much to say about the teen experience in America, *The Faculty* suffers from an abundance of glitz and superficiality in terms of style and approach.



Smells like teen spirit ... fighting aliens. In *The Faculty* (1998). Left to right: Shawn Hatosy, Laura Harris, Josh Hartnett, Jordana Brewster, Clea Duvall and Elijah Wood.

Some horror fans deeply dislike Kevin Williamson because they find the writer's ultraknowing, perhaps even cynical approach to be smarmy and shallow. That assessment is highly debatable, of course, but there's something about

the presentation of *The Faculty* that encourages that perspective: a slight failure on the part of everyone involved to take the premise of an alien invasion of a high school quite seriously enough. Why the

alien teachers need to be treated as jokes as well as threats is a mystery. *The Faculty* wants to have its cake and eat it too.

Fallen * * *

Critical Reception

"Lots of movies like this require their heroes to behave stupidly, but *Fallen* finds a variety of ways to irritate."—Rick Barton, *Gambit Weekly*, "*Fallen*," February 9, 1998

"*Fallen* is based on a delightfully shuddersome premise: demons can pass from person to person when we bump into each other on the subway or shake hands. This supposition lets suspense prevail over gore for a couple of cases of real heebie-jeebies."—Alicia Potter, *Boston Phoenix*, "*Fallen*," January 26, 1998

Cast and Crew

CAST: Denzel Washington (Detective John Hobbes); Donald Sutherland (Lt. Stanton); John Goodman (Jonesy); Embeth Davidtz (Gretta Milano); James Gandolfini (Lou); Elias Koteas (Edgar Reese); Gabriel Casseus (Art). Michael J. Pagan (Sam); Frank Medrano (Charles' Killer); Tony Michael Donnelly (Toby); Wendy Cutler (Denise); Aida Turturro (Tiffany).

CREW: Turner Pictures and Warner Bros. presents an Atlas Entertainment Production, a Greg Hoblit Film. *CASTING:* David Rubin. *MUSIC:* Tan Dun. "Time Is On My Side" and "Sympathy for the Devil" performed by the Rolling Stones. *COSTUME DESIGNER:* Colleen Atwood. *FILM EDITOR:* Lawrence Jordan. *PRODUCTION DESIGNER:* Terence Marsh. *DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:* Newton Thomas Sigel. *EXECUTIVE PRODUCER:* Nicholas Kazan, Elon Dashowitz, Robert Cavallo. *WRITTEN BY:* Nicholas Kazan. *PRODUCED BY:* Charles Raven, Dawn Steel. *DIRECTED BY:* Gregory Hoblit. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 122 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After the execution of psycho-serial killer Edgar Reese (Koteas), a copycat takes up his bloody work, confounding the detective who captured Reese, John Hobbes (Washington). As Hobbes investigates the new case, he begins to suspect that Reese was possessed by a demonic force, a belief reinforced by his contact with the daughter (Davidtz) of a hero cop who, many years earlier, committed suicide. Soon, Hobbes is being set up as the serial killer by the malevolent, form-jumping demon, and unless he can set a trap for the ages-old entity, he'll be facing his own day in the electric chair.

COMMENTARY: The supernatural serial killer, seen in films such as *Shocker* (1989), *The First Power* (1990) and *976-Evil II: The Astral Factor* (1992) gets a big-budget make-over in the gloomladen *Fallen*, an atmospheric movie that posits the existence of true (but undetected) evil lurking in our world.

On the plus side, *Fallen* tells its creepy, supernatural tale with great visual distinction and forges an inescapable and bleak atmosphere throughout its running time; one punctuated by a surprise ending. In some ways, it appears a child of *Se7en*.

On the other hand, *Fallen* is yet another entry in the exhausted, creatively-bankrupt "police procedural" format mode so prevalent in the 1990s, and this angle automatically seems to downgrade the carefully-crafted film from the status of great to just somewhat better-than-routine.

Fallen is the story of detective John Hobbes, and audiences may recognize something familiar in his name. "Hob" is an old slang word for the devil, and horror programming from *Quatermass* to John Carpenter's *In the Mouth of Madness* (1994) have used the name "Hobbs" (as in Hobbs End, or Hobbs Lane) to denote a place of evil, of sinister forces gathering. In *Fallen*, John Hobbes is the protagonist who goes into battle against a long-lived demon, so he is the opposite of "evil." In this case, however, his very name tells us about the battle he is going to wage.

Notice I wrote "wage" rather than win. In large part, *Fallen* concerns Hobbes' spiritual awakening and step-by-step disassociation from the material world of the 1990s. A paragon amongst cops, he becomes, in the eyes of his peers, a criminal. At one point, he is even forced to leave behind a child, his nephew, as he becomes a warrior for the cause and eventually faces death. But given the fact that

Hobbes is framed by his enemy, a body-hopping, serial-killing demon, and moving into the twilight days of his very existence, *Fallen* visually reflects the character's predicament.

Specifically, a preponderance of shots depict detective Hobbes behind-bars, a deliberate reversal of what you'd expect with a "white-knight" policeman who eschews "cream" (corruption) at every turn. The bars shots are one way of depicting the world as increasingly topsy-turvy, or upsidedown.

This staging choice begins in an early scene, when Hobbes visits the serial killer, Reese, in prison. Although there are also scenes of Reese behind-bars, director Hoblit reverses the angle so that we also are viewing Hobbes through bars for a considerable amount of time.

Later, on a basketball court, the camera adopts another view of Hobbes, again through bars. Finally, the visual sense of entrapment is repeated again, from a shot on a bridge ... again of bars. These compositions are important because, as they recur, the audience gains a subtle sense of Hobbes getting penned in, even before he is actually trapped by his enemy.

Thus, a sort of claustrophobic, paranoid atmosphere is generated.

Similarly, *Fallen's* color palette for the majority of the film is deep red, or brown, shades we associate with autumn, with the passing away of life. And when the film ends, it seems to do so in winter, with snow. These shifts in colors show us that the end is near, both for Hobbes himself, and apparently for the world, which is described, as per the title and dialogue, "as fallen," as a modern-day Babylon. The killer's message, scrawled upon his various victims is "apocalypse," which also portends the upcoming end. *Fallen* was released in 1998 and thus perfectly placed to play on fears of the upcoming Millennium and many religious beliefs about "End Times."

At times, *Fallen* is deeply unsettling and dark, but not because it presents yet another in an apparently unending stream of cinematic serial killers, but because it creates the idea of a world in which unseen dark forces work on humans.

Hobbes is told that if these immortal, demonic beings should "notice you noticing them" that "your life will be filled with regret." This is exactly the course of Hobbes' investigation. But the idea of dark, hidden forces lurking in secret but acting in our world is a potent one, and not entirely dissimilar from other 1990s conspiracyminded films such as *Blade* (1998) or *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). It's that feeling of unease that vultures are perched above us on the food chain: untouchable, powerful ... and hungry.



Detective Hobbes (Denzel Washington) and his partner, played by John Goodman (right), investigate a serial killer who seems to have returned from the grave in *Fallen* (1998).

Fallen's sense of paranoia grows to feverish levels as the Reese demon passes, in one scene, from person to person to person. Hobbes witnesses it all and realizes he is hopelessly outmatched—as does the audience. The fear here, also of 1990s vintage, is that a stranger (the anonymous stranger you encounter on the Net, for instance) is actually something worse, something dark and frightening.

By dealing with these ideas in such stylish fashion and by adhering to its dark theme—that Evil survives— *Fallen* nearly overcomes its unoriginal story-line and police procedural format. What proves disappointing about the film beyond those clichéd qualities is that Hobbes gives Reese an easy "tell" so that Hobbes can almost always recognize him, no matter what body he wears. That tell is the Rolling Stones song, "Time Is on My Side," and it gets sung so frequently in *Fallen* that by the time Reese gets into Hobbes' partner, Jonesy (John Goodman)—and he does an over-the-top rendition—it has lost all its original power.

But *Fallen*, which visualizes out-of-body experiences with aplomb and ends with a droll, if dark twist ending regarding the standard hardboiled cop voice-over narration, still deserves to be better-remembered than it is. The movie tends to get dismissed as just another cop-against-supernatural-serial-killer movie, when a close viewing reveals that it gets its power from the idea of a demonic force that acts like the Mafia. We're not supposed to see it.

And Heaven help us if we do.

Godzilla * *

Critical Reception

"Taken for what it is—a monster-on-the-loose saga—it's highly entertaining stuff. *Godzilla* is a heckuva lot better than Steven Spielberg's *The Lost World*, the often boring sequel to *Jurassic Park*. The special effects are dazzling which isn't surprising considering the film is from the team of Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin who brought us *Independence Day*. For lovers of monster movies, the scenes of destruction are terrific. And the surround sound will rock your den. The sequence featuring helicopters swarming after *Godzilla* as he swiftly thunders through the concrete canyons makes for a dizzying wild ride. The story line involving humans is simplistic and, thus, not intrusive. This is a monster movie and the monster is the star."—Doug Nye, *The State*, "' *Godzilla*' Not as Bad as People Said It Was," November 3, 1998

"One of genre cinema's great mistakes. We should've known when Roland Emmerich got behind it. Or when it was announced that the monster would look completely different and not breathe fire. Or when Matthew Broderick was cast in the lead. But we remained unflappably optimistic—and were punished appropriately for it."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Matthew Broderick (Dr. Nick Tatopoulos); Jean Reno (Phillippe Roache); Maria Pitilo (Audrey Timmonds); Hank Azaria ("Animal"); Kevin Dunn (Colonel Hicks); Michael Lerner (Mayor Ebert); Harry Shearer (Charles Caiman); Arabella Field (Lucy Palotti); Doug Savant (Sgt. O'Neil); Lory Goldman (Gene); Malcolm Danare (Dr. Craven); Vickie Lewis (Dr. Chapman).

CREW: Columbia Pictures Presents, *Godzilla*. *Casting:* David Bloch, April Webster. *Production Designer:* Oliver Scholl. *Music:* David Arnold. *Director of Photography:* Ueli Steiger. *Film Editors:* Peter Amundson, David Siegel. *Executive Producers:* Dean Devlin, Roland

Emmerich and Ute Emmerich. *Story by*: Ted Elliott, Terry Rossio, Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich. *Written by*: Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich. *Directed by*: Roland Emmerich. *MPAA Rating*: PG-13. *Running time*: 139 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Following a series of nuclear weapons tests in French Polynesia, a colossal iguana is born and beats a path for Manhattan Island in order to breed. A researcher in the effects of radiation, Dr. Nick Tatopoulos (Broderick) leaves his assignment in Chernobyl and joins the Army to learn more about the gigantic monster, named Godzilla by a Japanese fisherman. In Manhattan, Nick is reunited with the love of his life, Audrey (Pitilo), a grasping fledgling reporter who will do anything to seize a good story and advance her career. Audrey and her reckless cameraman, Animal (Azaria), set their sights on filming the destructive Godzilla, even as the beast's reign of terror continues and Mayor Ebert (Lerner) declares a state of emergency in the Big Apple. Before long, Nick concludes that Godzilla has laid eggs.

COMMENTARY: For all its various and sundry flaws, the re-imagined *Godzilla* (1998) actually opens with a series of canny and memorable visuals, not to mention a driving narrative pace. We begin this cinematic journey with grainy yellow film footage, cut in overlapping, successive form as a montage. We see, in short order, various views of nuclear tests being conducted on a lovely island in French Polynesia.

On the soundtrack, we are treated to a countdown to detonation in French. The resonant images of total destruction—of nuclear mushroom clouds—are soon super-imposed over images of several hapless iguanas blinking and reacting to the searing light and heat of the deadly atmospheric blossoms.

The final shot included in this brief credits sequence is of an iguana egg perched upright upon a sandy shore. We push towards the nest with a sense of dawning anticipation, and the clear implication is that the nuclear testing has mutated the very nature of the creature within.

This is the birth of Godzilla.

Again, this brief sequence is quite adroit and accomplished in terms of imagery and visual presentation. In terms of meaning, however, the scene's other implication is staggering: the fault for

Godzilla's creation rests with those pesky and immoral Frenchmen, those bad, bad cheese-loving, Old Europeans who conducted dastardly and dangerous nuclear tests, opening Pandora's Box in the process.

Although post-9/11, it has certainly become fashionable to blame the French for everything we don't like about the rest of the world, this plotpoint is such a blatant and craven example of "let's blame the other guy" hypocrisy that the thoughtful audience member will shudder at the sheer audacity of the conceit.

So let's just do a little factual tally here, and let the numbers speak for themselves. In our long history, America has test detonated nuclear weapons 1,054 times; France has done so a meager 210 times by comparison. And which nation is the only one in the world to ever use atomic bombs against a civilian population?

Let me give you a hint: It isn't France.

The original Japanese *Godzilla* films, of course, understood this fact all too clearly. When Ishiro Honda imagined *Godzilla: King of Monsters* (1954), it was forged as a cautionary tale, as an allegory for the very real dangers of the Atomic Age.

Between 1946 and 1958, America conducted twenty nuclear tests at the Bikini Atoll in the Pacific, for instance. A fifteen megaton American H-bomb test detonation irradiated over 5,000 square miles of ocean, and the crew of the *Lucky Dragon*, a tuna boat, soon developed radiation sickness.

So, in his native country, Godzilla represented nothing less than an atomic boogeyman, a symbol of the West laying waste to Tokyo and other cities just as America's bombs had laid waste to Nagasaki and Hiroshima. And the threat—as evidenced by the Bikini Atoll tests—was spookily ongoing. The brilliant original film also dealt with the idea that the world would soon see even more destructive weaponry arise during the nuclear age, in this case, the fictional "Oxygen Destroyer."

Given this history of symbolism and social responsibility, for the 1998 American film to brazenly point to the French as the progenitors of "the nuclear monster" is not only hypocrisy ... but pandering. Perhaps the filmmakers wished to avoid—at all costs—confronting the core American blockbuster audience with such unpleasant truth. I mean, if people were really to stop and consider America's role in this life-and-death matter, they might not feel like visiting Taco Bell, the film's sponsor after the movie, or buying the movie soundtrack, featuring a hit by Sean "P. Diddy" Combs.

But imagine, just imagine, that the makers of the American

Godzilla had decided to be even just a little bit courageous instead of pandering. Then their movie would have concerned something important, the idea of America suffering "blow back" from its bad behavior. Godzilla as a product of American nuclear testing would have literally been a representation of our international "sin" come home to roost: angry, destructive and all-but unstoppable.

This cogent, powerful idea (which would have carried even deeper resonance after 9/11) would have granted the U.S. version of *Godzilla* a larger, overarching purpose and a corollary seriousness to the searing Japanese masterpiece.

But by taking instead an easy route, by making the French (!) the culprit in dangerous nuclear shenanigans, this *Godzilla* succeeds only in passing the buck and rendering the film thematically insignificant. Accordingly, it is indeed wholly lacking in any sort of deeper or relevant meaning. Godzilla's reign of destruction in Manhattan means absolutely nothing now ... America is just a random victim of a random destructive spree.

Again, the Japanese *Godzilla* films—for all their miniature cityscapes and men-in-monstersuits—often boasted a powerful sense of social commentary or responsibility, whether the issue was the Nuclear Age or even, in the 1970s, environmental pollution (*Godzilla* vs. *Hedorah* [1971]). The American film doesn't live up to that tradition.

Following the opening credit montage and shifting of the blame to the French, *Godzilla* quickly transforms itself into a fast-paced, globetrotting "mystery" in the format of a disaster film, like Emmerich and Devlin's earlier hit, *Independence Day* (1996). In short order, we see a Japanese fishing vessel in the South Pacific Ocean attacked by a deadly beast of gargantuan (but unseen) proportions. This sequence, in particular, appears faithful to the spirit and content of the Toho series, as it features a sort of ocean-going "early warning" that a monster is fast approaching civilization. Oftentimes in Toho's *Godzilla* films, the productions would similarly open with a lonely ship at sea and an encounter with monstrous terror.

Then we're whisked off to Chernobyl to meet our hero, "Worm Guy," Nick Tatapoulos (Matthew Broderick), a scientist and former anti-nukes activist who believes that nuclear mutations are responsible for the creation of new species the world over. The epitome of bravery and daring (not!), this hero works hard to effect "change" from within the system, from inside a nuclear regulatory agency.

Nick's introduction in the Ukraine serves as an opportunity for the filmmakers to extrude an unfunny joke about his foreign-sounding

name and the continued inability of the people around him to pronounce it correctly. This joke (the mispronunciation of "Tatapoulos") is repeated four times in approximately twenty-minutes, and adds nothing to the story, characterization, or overall entertainment in *Godzilla*. It's an in-joke, since Patrick Tatapoulos is the artist who created the design of Godzilla for this film, but one might rightly ask: what's the point?

Regardless, next stop Tahiti. Then off to Panama. Then to Jamaica. Then to the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. We find ourselves following—again and again, with great anticipation—Godzilla's progress from French Polynesia to Manhattan. These tightly-edited sequences are brief, sharp, and portentous, fully engaging our imagination as we see "evidence" of Godzilla's handiwork and presence (footprints, claw-marks, etc.), but don't actually get a view of the monster.

By the thirty-minute point, however, the movie has landed in Manhattan permanently, and the pace suddenly slows to a crawl following all the international action. After about fifteen minutes in NYC, the sense of anticipation, pace and excitement drains away and a feeling of malaise sets in. Instead of focusing on the mystery or origin of Godzilla, for instance, the film lingers on 1990s workplace sexual politics as an aspiring reporter, Audrey Timmonds (Maria Pitillo), attempts to advance her career but must deal with the sexism of anchorman boss, Charles Caiman (Harry Shearer). Her friends, including receptionist Lucy (Arabella Field) and Lucy's camera man husband, "Animal" (Hank Azaria), tell Audrey she is just too nice to make it in New York.

The arrival of Godzilla in the Big Apple, however, provides Audrey just the ladder-climbing opportunity she has long sought, since she once dated Nick and so has an "in" to interview him again. She does so, and illicitly steals Nick's top secret cassette-tape of a Godzilla survivor ... which she promptly airs on television. Afterwards, because of Audrey's behavior, Nick loses his job hunting Godzilla and must team with a French group of secret agents led by Jean Reno.

Concerning Audrey, I'm not a firm believer that movie characters need be of high moral fiber or do "good things" to be worthwhile or interesting to watch. But Audrey is just ... an awful, petty human being. She betrays Nick's trust, and she transmits secret information that could jeopardize soldiers in the field and citizens too. I mean, the world is falling apart around her (the Chrysler Building is destroyed! American citizens have died by the dozen!), and she's just jockeying for a superior position at work. Audrey has no sense of loyalty to anybody outside herself, not even the man she ostensibly "loves."

In generations past, such qualities would have assured that such an immoral, selfish character pay dearly for her considerable trespasses. Think about the fate of the Charles Grodin character, Fred Wilson, in the 1970s remake of *King Kong* (a film I admired, despite the ubiquitous bad reviews).

Or for a more contemporary example, remember the fate of Saffron Burrows' "Frankenstein"-style character in *Deep Blue Sea* (1999). Monster movies have almost always boasted a sense of cosmic justice and morality, but again, this *Godzilla* plays as a betrayal of genre history. This film wants Audrey to be Nick's love interest, after all. So after she sins, Audrey spends the film's last act whining and wallowing in self-pity about what a lousy person she is.

But, importantly, the film doesn't even seem to believe that Audrey has really done anything wrong, or even unusual for that matter. She's just a good person who made a "mistake," according to the dialogue. Yes, but quite a pre-meditated one: Audrey deceived Nick by playing on their intimate relationship, waited till he left his tent, and then stole his top secret property. Then she recorded her own video introduction to the taped material (in which she was the "star reporter") and then passed the tape off again to her superiors at the news station. Then she waited for it to air with excitement. Not until Audrey saw Nick again (leaving the city in a cab, tail between legs) did Audrey even consider the possible negative ramifications of her behavior. It's one thing to make a little mistake, but if Audrey was just a good person, why didn't she—at any time during the shooting, editing or waiting for broadcast of her report—reconsider her actions?

The film's other protagonists are also difficult to like. Take Nick. He is a brilliant scientist dedicated to studying new species ... but not once does he seem to recognize how amazing, or how wondrous, *Godzilla* is. Not once does Nick stand up to the military and state that at least one of the *Godzilla* hatchlings should be preserved from destruction for future study.

Nick is smart, but like Audrey (and like the film itself) he seems to boast no moral compass. Nick figures out a way to attract *Godzilla* (with a pile of smelly fish) but never stops to consider that he is leading a new species to total annihilation. At least in the monster movies of yesteryear, a wrong-headed scientist (an egghead communist, usually) would speak up and talk about the importance of alien contact, or preserving the last representative of a species before he was dismissed out-of-hand as a pacifist Russkie by military heroes. The point was that—even if you didn't agree with the scientist—at least the viewpoint was heard. This *Godzilla* doesn't even offer that much. Nick seems to have no perspective at all on *Godzilla*, his reign

of terror, or the monster's place in the modern world.

Finally, yet another grievous character miscalculation: two major characters in the film are Mayor Ebert (Michael Lerner) and his balding campaign advisor, Gene. Famously, these men are named after popular film critics Roger Ebert and the late Gene Siskel. Indeed, the characters are cast especially for their physical similarities to the two film reviewers. Apparently, the characters are included in the film as sort of filmmaker's "revenge," since both critics gave thumbs down ratings to previous Emmerich-Devlin pictures, *Stargate* (1994) and *Independence Day*.

These are not throwaway characters that appear once or twice, or only briefly. These are supporting characters in the film with flourishes of dialogue and a presence in numerous scenes. Despite this, they are merely one-note jokes, offering thumbs up, thumbs down and little else of value. The *Godzilla* screenplay takes cheap shots over Ebert's weight (two of his scenes involve the mayor's love of candy). But again, what's the point? Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel don't like your film ... so you make fat jokes?

Is this really the best way to deflect attention from your detractors ... by putting them up on a pedestal and featuring them in major roles in your movie?

Do you know what might be the best way to get revenge on Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel for their negative reviews? Make a good movie, one that they would have had to acknowledge as a superior example of the form. Instead, we get Roger and Gene as cardboard figures of ridicule, and the whole thing is just ugly, not to mention exceedingly juvenile.

Again, this *Godzilla* settles for the stupid and obvious when a degree of wit is called for. Put bluntly, when the filmmakers introduced these Ebert/Siskel characters for purposes of revenge, they weren't thinking about the history or tradition of *Godzilla*. They were thinking about themselves. Again, not really a good way to demonstrate to fans of *Godzilla* that you are taking their cherished icon seriously.

I realize that some long-time original *Godzilla* fans are going to be upset (or perhaps enraged) with me for what I write next, but this *Godzilla* does feature some rather remarkable special effects (indeed, the best ever in a *Godzilla* movie up to 1998). And I don't, by reflex, disapprove of the new design of the titular monster, either.

In essence, this is like arguing that the revamped design of the *Enterprise* in the new *Star Trek* invalidates that entire film. General audiences in America in 1998 would simply not have accepted a man

in a suit as the movie's Godzilla. It made sense to change the monster's appearance. And though certainly different than Toho's design, it seems to me that the monster design of the 1998 film is entirely serviceable and even borderline interesting. For instance, this Godzilla does boast a rather heroic jaw-line, one even more square-chinned than Superman's. What I'm arguing, perhaps ineloquently, is that Godzilla here can look "different" from the Japanese original, and the film can still be judged a success. Assuming it was true to the spirit and history of the franchise.

Of course, it isn't true to the spirit and history of the franchise. Indeed, that's the very reason this *Godzilla* fails so egregiously and thoroughly. It does not in any way, shape or form respect *Godzilla's* past. There seems to be no respect on the part of the filmmakers—or the characters in the drama, for that matter—for the titular "monster." Indeed, there's even a line spoken at some point in the film that suggests "he's only an animal."

Yes, but a rather remarkable animal, wouldn't you say? Measuring 400 feet tall and all. The shark in *Jaws* was only an "animal," but recall the myriad ways Steven Spielberg successfully mythologized it utilizing shark lore, the true story of the USS *Indianapolis*, and his careful presentation of the beast.

Unfortunately, the only thing this *Godzilla* gets from *Jaws* is one line of dialogue. "We're going to need bigger guns," instead of "we're going to need a bigger boat."

Damningly, the screenwriters here provide their movie not a single moment of wonder, of characters expressing awe or even real horror at the presence of Godzilla in the modern world or his destructive actions. This is the one flaw the film simply cannot overcome: it doesn't know what to think about Godzilla, and therefore the audience doesn't know what to think about him.

In *King Kong*, Carl Denham (and later Jack Prescott) had a viewpoint about Kong: he was dangerous, but ultimately pitiable ... he was taken from his land and defeated. The *Jurassic Park* films boasted an opinion about their monsters too (genetically engineered dinosaurs): that the beasts were simply doing what dinosaurs would do and that the destruction they caused was the fault of man, who had foolishly resurrected the beasts.

Going back to the original *Godzilla* in Japan— depending on the point in history— *Godzilla* was either a fearsome representation of the Nuclear Age (a villain to be destroyed), or later, Japan's savior from even more grave threats.

Without exaggeration, you could remove Godzilla (the lizard)

from every scene in Emmerich's film and replace him with a swarm of killer bees, a Category 5 Tornado, a giant robot from outer space, global warming or absolutely any other threat imaginable ... and it would make virtually no difference at all to the characters or storyline. In the final moments of the film, you have no idea if you should root for Godzilla or for the U.S. military. Are we supposed to like Godzilla? The human heroes? What should we feel?

Unforgivably, this film candy coats Godzilla's reign of destruction so that he doesn't seem "evil" or villainous (as he did in *King of Monsters*), and yet no human character ever stands up for Godzilla and proclaims, "he's just a parent trying to protect his young," either. The beast is neither fish nor fowl, apparently.

In one scene, the Godzilla offspring are played as silly comic relief, tripping and stumbling all over gum balls and basketballs, and yet in the next moment, they are being viciously blown apart by American bombers without a word of sorrow or regret. Again, there is no coherent attitude towards the creatures. Not even, "I hate to fire these missiles, but it's them or us. And I choose us...!"

In the original *Godzilla*, viewers might quite rightly have felt overcome or sickened with the lingering horror of the monster's attacks (the survivors looked positively agonized). Here, the filmmakers can't be bothered to feature a single death in terms human beings would recognize as realistic. But here's the thing that they missed in defanging the beast: take away Godzilla's violence and amazing might and he becomes just a galloping nuisance—Johnny Depp wrecking his hotel room, writ large. A nuisance, but not a villain, and certainly not a grave threat. This empty hole in viewpoint and directorial perspective leaves Godzilla to dwell in a strange, uninteresting place: neither villainous nor heroic, neither good nor bad—just a big lizard tearing up jack because ... well ... he's big and unwieldy.

When Godzilla's radioactive eyeballs finally fade out in close-up at the film's finale, we feel nothing at all—not even relief—because the film has never bothered to develop a coherent point of view about the creature. All the good special effects mean nothing in light of this thematic void. We might as well have watched two hours of a hurricane toppling skyscrapers.

Size does matter, and thus we must conclude that the Emmerich/Devlin *Godzilla* fails on a colossal scale. Some scenes in the film are quite accomplished—like the giant lizard's chase of a taxi cab near the finale—but because we don't care about the humans or monsters in the drama, much of this good work is just the equivalent of a train

wreck. And we're the rubbernecks, slowing down to watch.

There's this almost irresistible (but momentary) desire to stop and gawk at the sights of *Godzilla*, but nothing that legitimately holds up as art. Again, for the mighty and meaningful, long-lived *Godzilla* to be reduced to the equivalent of a meaningless amusement park ride is a direct betrayal of the monster's history and tradition.

LEGACY: A new *Godzilla*, one having nothing to do with this film, was announced to be in preproduction in the year 2011.

Halloween H20 * * *

Critical Reception

" *H20* may even be better than John Carpenter's original, and that's going some, because it capitalizes on the Laurie Strode character's history. It makes her much more complicated and even archetypal. Plus, it's fun. It even has a classic recognition scene, when the hero comes to understand her fate and accepts it—the Greeks knew what they were doing, theater-wise."—Bob Graham, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, "Sweet Revenge: Jamie Lee Curtis Returns to Face Down Her Killer Brother in *Halloween: H20*," August 5, 1998, page E-1

"With her son in danger, Laurie acts tougher than Sigourney Weaver in the *Alien* series. Curtis' own mom, Janet Leigh, does a cameo that evokes her role in *Psycho*, the Hitchcock classic this splatter fest can't hope to match. At its best, *Halloween: H20* keeps you ducking from things that go bump in the night. The scares come at a clip, and so do the surprises...."—Peter Travers, *Rolling Stone*, " *Halloween*— Then and Now," August 20, 1998, Issue 793, page 114

"This film did so very many things right. It connected its tone, some of its lighting, and even its humor to John Carpenter's original film but unlike most sequels in this series, it didn't try to remake the original. This was a modern horror film with characters from an old favorite and it was all done right. Jamie Lee Curtis is fantastic in the film, playing not the Laurie Strode we knew but the Laurie Strode she had to become after the events of 1978. Very seldom do we get to see a character we know and love portrayed through historical bookends—here, we see the other side of Laurie—she's so different but she's still the terrified teenager. The classroom tie-in to *Frankenstein* is interesting—the man facing his monster but more importantly, the man facing his creation. Laurie has kept Michael alive over the years— she's done his terrorizing for him, but once confronted with the real thing, she finally stands up to him. Donald Pleasence is barely missed—Jamie Lee Curtis has in some ways incorporated his role here (nicely done!). The hodgepodge of music from different films (*Mimic*, to name one) actually works well here. This was a very, very satisfying experience and kudos to those involved for finally hitting one out of the park in a series that had gone totally sour (and would soon return to the same, if not deeper, depths)."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"After a series of progressively worse sequels, *The Shape* returned to his best form since the original in this terrific reinvigoration of a tired slasher franchise. Back when Rob Zombie was still making music, Steve Miner defied probability and made the first really good *Halloween* flick since the original. Jamie Lee Curtis' return to the series as Michael's sister Laurie plays a big part in that."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jamie Lee Curtis (Laurie Strode/Keri Tate); Josh Hartnett (John Tate); Adam Arkin (Will Brennan); Michelle Williams (Molly); Adam Hann-Byrd (Charlie); Jodi Lyn O'Keefe (Sarah); Janet Leigh (Norma); Branden Williams (Tony); Nancy Stephens (Marion); L.L.

Cool J (Ronny); Joseph Gordon-Levitt (Jimmy); Chris Durand (Michael Myers).

CREW: A Dimension Films release; Moustapha Akkad Presents a Nightfall production of a Steve Miner film. *Casting:* Ross Brown, Mary West. *Halloween Theme by:* John Carpenter. *Music:* John Ottman. *Additional Music:* Marco Beltrami. *Film Editor:* Patrick Lussier. *Production Designer:* John Willett. *Director of Photography:* Daryn Okada. *Co-Executive Producers:* Bob Weinstein, Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Williamson. *Executive Producer:* Moustapha Akkad. *Producer:* Paul Freeman. *Based on Characters created by:* Debra Hill, John Carpenter. *Screenplay by:* Robert Zappia, Matt Greenberg. *Story by:* Robert Zappia. *Directed by:* Steve Miner. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 80 minutes.

INCANTATION: "I wanted to show the real horror of horror movies, which is that it wreaks havoc on anybody who survives. And that the word 'survivor' is a hackneyed term that nobody understands, because ... that kind of an attack is not without its permanent damage...."⁷²— Jamie Lee Curtis discusses the story underlying Laurie Strode's return

SYNOPSIS: After a twenty-year lull, Haddonfield's killer Michael Myers (Durand) re-surfaces and learns that his surviving sister, Laurie Strode (Curtis), is not dead. Rather, she's now "Keri Tate," the stern headmistress of a posh private highschool in northern California called Hillcrest. As Halloween 1998 nears, Michael stalks Laurie, her 17-year-old son, John (Hartnett), and his teenage friends Molly (Williams), Charlie (Hann-Byrd) and Sarah (O'Keefe). What Myers hasn't reckoned on, however, is the fact that Laurie Strode is tired of living a life in fear and is ready to bring the fight right back to her notorious brother.

COMMENTARY: The 20th anniversary sequel to John Carpenter's 1978 classic *Halloween* understands that, at least in the case of boogeyman Michael Myers, simplicity is a virtue. To refresh the memory: by the late 1990s, the *Halloween* films had become hopelessly mired in unnecessary, confusing complexions.

In 1995's *Curse of Michael Myers*, for instance, Laurie Strode's adult daughter had given birth to Michael Myers' baby, and some Haddonfield citizens were secretly part of a modern Druid "Thorn" cult, protecting Myers from authorities. The film ended with syringes of green goo, the specter of surgical genetic manipulation, a mystical passing of the Druidic torch, and the promise of another hapless, utterly incomprehensible sequel.

By contrast, Steve Miner's streamlined *Halloween H20* dispenses with this complicated back story, picks up after the events of 1981's *Halloween 2*, pits Michael Myers against an older, traumatized Laurie Strode, references the literary giant, *Frankenstein*, and gets the entire scarifying job done in less than eighty minutes.

Talk about ruthless efficiency!

Just as the title promises, *H20* catches up with Laurie Strode "twenty years later." The teenager girl we once knew and loved is now a pill-popping, barely functioning-alcoholic ensconced in midlife who has never quite been able to move beyond the traumatic events of October 31, 1978.

Laurie's responsible and diligent teenage son, John (John Hartnett), can see how wounded his mom really is, and, at least up till Halloween 1998, has lived according to her strict, restrictive and bizarre rules, calling himself an "Oedipal Enabler" for his steadfast devotion.

In *H20* Jamie Lee Curtis re-connects powerfully with the role that made her famous, first as a brittle, tortured soul, and later as a determined, fed-up avenger, ready to go toe-to-toe with Michael to protect her family.

In the original *Halloween*, Laurie Strode sat in a high school English Lit class as a student and discussed "fate" and the components that made it significant. "You can't escape your fate," the teacher told her. In *H20*, the circle gets squared, and Laurie is herself an English teacher, lecturing students about literature.

In particular, Laurie discusses Shelley's Promethean novel *Frankenstein* and the idea that Victor was paralyzed by fear and confronted the monster too late. He confronts his "creation" only after Elizabeth, William and all his loved ones are dead, murdered by his own "child."

This is also Laurie's dilemma at this point, and the motivation that ultimately galvanizes her. She must stop Michael before he kills her seventeen-year-old boy, as he killed her best friends back in 1978 and as he kills her boyfriend, Will Brennan (Arkin) in 1998. This is

important because the innocent teenager who believed that fate had selected one destiny for her makes an opposite conclusion in adulthood. Laurie finally moves past the crises of her youth and takes fate (and an axe) into her own hands.



Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis, left) catches a glimpse of her brother and nemesis, Michael Myers, in the anniversary horror sequel *Halloween H20: Twenty Years Later* (1998).

Also reflecting *Frankenstein*, there's a familial relationship between monster and hero in the *Halloween* mythos. Not father and son, of course. But Michael and Laurie are siblings. That relationship allows for a brief sense of pathos and sympathy for the monster at the film's conclusion. Before swinging the axe that murders her brother, Laurie contemplates the Shape at close-up range as he is pinned between a tree and an ambulance. He's still wearing the white mask, but their eyes meet. He reaches out to touch her. We wonder what he's thinking. Are his eyes begging to be spared? Or begging to be killed?

In this extended moment there's the reckoning that Michael is still a great enigma. We don't know why this boy became monster or why he kills ... but he has to die. And in killing Michael, Laurie literally murders her mid-life crisis, "something so tragic you never recover from it." Killing Michael represents her break with the past,

and this too fits in with Carpenter's original. There, some suspected that Michael represented Laurie's id, brought to murderous life over her adolescent, sexual repression.

Halloween H20 also pays tribute to the original *Halloween's* importance in the genre as essentially the "link" between the genre's formative past (*Psycho*, represented by the presence of Curtis's mother, Janet Leigh, in the role of "Norma") and the meta, post-modern future—meaning Wes Craven's *Scream*— by featuring a reference to the "Beckers" (Drew Barrymore's family in that film) and a clip of *Scream 2* on a dorm TV set.

The positioning of the *Halloween* mythos, both inspired by *Psycho* and inspiring to the makers of *Scream*, makes viewers aware of horror's history in a way that doesn't interfere with the narrative but which adds to the overall quality of the film.

The obsessive observer of 1970 and 1980s slashers will also note that the tenets of the slasher paradigm are brought out of mothballs for *H20*. In short order, we get the false scare (Charlie and Jodi Lynn in the kitchen), the car that won't start, and the *coup de grâce* (Michael's decapitation). In this case, each cliché comes flying so fast, you aren't bothered. It's more like catching up with an old friend than meeting an overused story element.

Steve Miner's direction here is efficient and not too flashy, picking up on the "prowling" camera style of John Carpenter without overtly aping it. He shows a real flair in his handling of the teen characters too, folks who are more authentically likable than some of their 1990s brethren. He even stages the film's action with a sense of style and fun. *H20's* prologue, set in Langdon, Illinois, on October 29, 1998, and featuring the great Nancy Stephens from *Halloween*, also works in spades with its P.O.V. steadicam, foreground jolts, and return of the deadly Michael Myers. In a word, this prologue is perfect.

Also, the climax of *H20* is undeniably powerful, though later undone by another unnecessary sequel. At long last, Laurie slays the Monster. With one swift stroke, she decapitates Michael Myers with an axe.

We see his severed head land on the ground, in extreme close-up, and the trademark *Halloween* theme kicks in as the film cuts to end credits. It's a bravura (and unexpectedly final) punctuation in a film series renowned for always reviving the Boogeyman for one last kill.

H20 has its share of missteps. The scenes involving L.L. Cool J as an aspiring-writer/security guard chatting with his sassy wife on the telephone seem cringe-inducing and unnecessary today, and Arkin plays his character with such snark and insincerity that you wonder

why a nice girl like Laurie would be attracted to the guy.

But the film's last act is scary as hell, with Myers and Laurie going toe-to-toe on the abandoned Hillcrest Academy campus. Furthermore, Laurie's story arc—taking fate into her own hands—is one eminently worthy of Curtis's return. In the words of the film, "you have to concentrate on what's right" in your life, and that edict also goes for *Halloween* sequels, I suppose.

In the case of *H20* those "right" qualities include clarity, efficiency and not a small amount of reverence for the 1978 classic.

These are exactly the right ingredients for the 20th anniversary of the Boogeyman.



Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis) has an axe to grind, in the climax of *Halloween H20*.

LEGACY: The triumph of *H20* proved shortlived. A sequel, *Halloween: Resurrection*, followed in 2002 and revived the decapitated Michael Myers yet again. Simultaneously, the film offered Laurie Strode, with Jamie Lee Curtis contractually obligated to return in the film's first scene. In 2007, Rob Zombie re-made Carpenter's original *Halloween*, turning it into a white-trash epic which concerned Michael Myers as a boy and his motivations for turning to violence. It was a box office smash, and a new *Halloween 2* followed in 2009. This sequel/remake

infuriated the *Halloween* faithful with its many unusual and bizarre touches, but proved, at least to this author's eyes, the work of a genuine, inspired talent.

***I Still Know What You Did Last Summer* ***

Critical Reception

"There's no attempt by director Danny Cannon (*Judge Dredd*) to bring anything fresh to the material. He's uninspired in his mechanized application of the formula. The staging is unimaginative, the killings perfunctory."—Brent Kliewer, *Santa Fe New Mexican*, "Nothing There There in *I Still Know*" November 20, 1998, page 20

"With suspense low and predictability high, the plot starts to get sillier than the film's title as the mystery stalker chases everyone with his fish hook and does things with it that no right-thinking fisherman should."—Brendan Cole, *Taranaki Daily News*, "Promising Start, but a Silly Plot," February 16, 1998, page 17

"What the filmmakers lack in new ideas they make up for in gruesomeness, but the zest of a scary urban myth come to life which infected the original is gone. The exotic setting hardly makes up for the diminishing return of entertainment value."—Michael Lamb, *Sunday Star-Times*, "Another Season of Teen Garroting," December 20, 1998, page D4

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jennifer Love Hewitt (Julie James); Freddie Prinze, Jr. (Ray Bronson); Brandy (Karla Wilson); Mekhi Phifer (Tyrell); Muse Watson (Ben Willis); Bill Cobb (Estes); Matthew Settle (Will Benson); Jeffrey Combs (Mr. Brooks); Jennifer Esposito (Nancy); John Hawkes (Dave); Jack Black (Titus).

CREW: Columbia/Mandalay Entertainment, a Neal H. Moritz

Production of a Danny Cannon Film. *Casting*: Jackie Burch. *Music*: John Frizzell. *Film Editor*: Rick Prior. *Production Designer*: Doug Kraner. *Director of Photography*: Vernon Layton. *Produced by*: Neal H. Moritz, Erick Feig, Stokely Chaffin, William S. Beasley. *Written by*: Trey Callaway. *Directed by*: Danny Cannon. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Even a year after being terrorized by Ben Willis (Watson), the frightening fisherman with a hook, college student Julie James (Hewitt) still lives out her days in fear and guilt, always looking over her shoulder. Then, one morning, she and her roommate, Karla (Brandy), win a radio telephone contest and win four free tickets to the Bahamas. Unfortunately, Julie's boyfriend, Ray (Prinze), can't get away from his job on a fishing boat in South Port, leaving Julie to go with a new beau, Will (Settle), Karla and her boyfriend, Tyrell (Phifer). When they get to the Bahamas, however, the co-eds learn that it is "storm season" and that their entire trip has been arranged by the murderous Fisherman. One by one, Ben Willis begins killing off the youngsters, even as Ray— back in the States—races to get to Julie.

COMMENTARY: Even the title of *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer* doesn't make any sense. Shouldn't it be, *I Still Know What You Did That Summer*? Or *I Still Know What You Did Two Summers Ago*? Or *I Know What You Did the Summer Before Last*?

Still, given this sequel's general lack of coherence and sledgehammer approach to horror, the title is probably the least of the film's concerns. Picking up a year after the events of Jim Gillespie and Kevin Williamson's 1997 film, *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer* finds Julie, indelicately termed "Miss Psychotic Episode" by one of her friends, experiencing post-traumatic stress after her violent encounters with the Fisherman.

Yet, humorously, actress Jennifer Love Hewitt has been made to look more attractive and more glamorous here than she did in the first film.

PTSD never looked so ... hot.

Hewitt gave a sincere and competent performance in *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, but she really phones it in for the sequel. Instead of building a believable character, the actress simply recycles

her trademark move from the first film. What that amounts to is simply Hewitt gazing skyward angrily, arms open, blouse unbuttoned—breasts flopping about—shouting at the heavens, "What are you waiting for!"

That sort of thing.

And once more, rage never looked so hot.

Or insipid, really...

Adding insult to injury, Jack Black shows up wearing dreadlocks in *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer*, playing one of his trademark insufferable, unfunny characters, a drug-dealer named Titus. He talks endlessly about "gettin' jiggy" and "taking chill pills" and never before in slasher history have you so longed for a character to die horribly. A walking, talking cliché, Black makes the gang members of *Friday the 13th Part III* look like paragons of subtlety and gritty reality.

In terms of performance, the only bright spot in this sequel is Jeffrey Combs, who delivers a scene-stealing supporting performance as a dismissive, condescending hotel clerk. In this case, he's just expressing how the audience feels about the shallow Julie and her friends, but boy is he good at it.

I Still Know What You Did Last Summer, like Jack Black's character, is way over the top. Nighttime scenes are rendered with an exaggerated, ubiquitous blue filter. And every would-be frightening molehill is made into a mountain by the pounding score, the cockeyed angles and the hysteria of the cast. The moment when the message "I Still Know What You Did Last Summer" is displayed on a Karaoke screen—and nobody notices except Julie—is a perfect example. It's treated with such weight that it ends up seeming hilarious.

A one-way ticket to Dumbsville, *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer* makes the first film in the series look like high-art. There, the youthful characters were intelligent, burdened with moral questions, and more than interesting enough to hold the attention as writer Kevin Williamson played with old fashioned slasher conventions.

By direct contrast, the characters in the sequel are dumb as stumps. They go on vacation during storm season. They don't believe Julie even after the legend "I Still Know" is written in blood over a corpse's head. They target the wrong guy. They trust the wrong guy. The movie is just one stupid move after another.

While this kind of proud dumb-as-stump-ism might have passed muster in the heyday of the slasher paradigm in the early 1980s, when the form hadn't been recycled a million times, in the mocking, cynical nineties, *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer* practically invites

scorn and hoots of derision.

I thought this was the age of the smart slasher.

***John Carpenter's Vampires* * * ***

Critical Reception

"Like its blunt title suggests the movie is single minded and devoid of frills.... It is deliriously bloody and rude.... What keeps *John Carpenter's Vampires* from completely disintegrating is its unnerving, indelible imagery. Carpenter's imagination may not be as fresh as it used to be, but he can still mine the nightmarish power of horrific visuals."—Rene Rodriguez, *Charlotte Observer*, "Carpenter's *Vampires* Has Plenty of Blood, Not Much Fun," October 30, 1998, page 10E

"John Carpenter just can't win. This is a pretty good film, the most obvious Western of all of Carpenter's Westerns, it delivered solid action and some creepy atmosphere—no other director would have done a better job with this film than Carpenter did. This was the age of Lestat, however, when audiences wanted seduction from their vampires, not scares. Hopefully, like *The Thing* this one will be appreciated more in the future. James Woods worked well as an action hero here, surprisingly."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

Cast and Crew

CAST: James Woods (Jack Crow); Daniel Baldwin (Montoya); Sheryl Lee (Katrina); Thomas Ian Griffith (Valek); Tim Guinee (Father Adam Guiteau); Maximillian Schell (Cardinal Alba).

CREW: Columbia Pictures and Largo Entertainment present a Storm King Production. *Casting:* Reuben Cannon and Eddie Dunlop. *Production Designer:* Thomas A. Walsh. *Special Effects Make-up:* Howard Berger, Robert Kurtzman, Gregory Nicotero. *Costume Designer:* Robin Michel Bush. *Music:* John Carpenter. *Director of Photography:* Gary B. Kibbe. *Film Editor:* Edward Wars -chilka. *Based on the book Vampire\$ by:* John Steakley. *Written by:* Dan Jakoby. *Executive Producer:* Barr Potter. *Produced by:* Sandy King. *Directed by:* John Carpenter. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 108 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After cleaning out a dark nest of vampires on a remote, Southwestern farm, Vatican-funded vampire slayer Jack Crow (Woods) and his team of mercenaries are betrayed by a treacherous ally. At the Sun God Motel, the master vampire Valek (Griffith) strikes back in full force, leaving only Jack, his right hand, Montoya (Baldwin), and a bitten hooker, Katrina (Lee), alive. Jack realizes he can use the increasingly-undead Katrina to psychically track Valek, and with the help of a new Catholic priest, the young and inexperienced Father Guiteau (Guinee), sets out to find Valek's nest. This quest is of the utmost importance because Valek is attempting to acquire the black crucifix that was used in a botched exorcism centuries ago and which created the first vampire. If he gets it, vampires will be able to walk in daylight. Unfortunately, Jack has enemies in high places, and he soon realizes there is a conspiracy afoot between Valek and a Catholic cardinal (Schell).

COMMENTARY: *John Carpenter's Vampires* is another directorial reworking of the auteur's favorite genre: the Western. Here, in Carpenter's Southwestern Gothic mode, vampires are reimagined as fly-by-night, low-life blood bandits, and vampire slayer Jack Crow is the equivalent of a modern gunslinger.

The film's final battle is set in a Western ghost town, one overrun by vampires, and in the film's central friendship of Crowe/Montoya there's a resonance of the 1959 Howard Hawks western, *Rio Bravo*.

However, in keeping with the prevailing mood of the 1990s, the film also proposes a conspiracy of convenience between a high-ranking Church official and the vampires.

The opening set piece in *Vampires* represents John Carpenter at

his most stylish. After a look at a wide-open Western skyline, the camera zeroes in, like a Desert Storm era missile, on an isolated farmhouse in the desert, a vampire "nest." The mercenary slayers pull up, grungy, swarthy and heavily armed, and Carpenter quickly balances opposing, reverse zooms against each other. On one hand, we have Woods' sun-glassed eyes, looming larger, and on the other, we push in closer to the nest's front door. It's a clear, filmic representation of hunter and hunted. Then the team, lensed from a low angle, makes its entrance into Hell itself.

From here, *Vampires* plunges full tilt into terror as Crow leads the way into the claustrophobic, shadowy nest and the team battles one leaping, powerful vampire at a time. The method by which to destroy these vampires is time-consuming and tense too. It involves "staking" the creatures of the night with a sort of metal spear, tying them to a winch, and then dragging the vamps into that wide-open western sky ... where the villains sizzle in the blinding sunlight. Their deaths are, literally, explosive.

Carpenter wisely focuses on the practice and minutiae of this vamp-killing operation, and his dedicated attention to the "how" of vampire slaying quickly grounds the film in reality, making it seem almost like a documentary account. And all of this action is vetted using extremely tight framing, with the slayers bumping into each other in the small room, and the vampires literally landing in frame. It's a splendid, pulse-quickenning opener shot with amazing ingenuity and originality.

To accentuate the physical might and overwhelming villainy of the film's antagonist, Valek, Carpenter imaginatively makes use of the dissolve, a gradual transition of images, and one noticeably softer than the traditional cut. As Valek decimates Crow's crew at the Sun God Motel, the technique of the dissolve seems to augment his stature and power. Valek seems to move only "in" the dissolves themselves, remaining mostly stationary—an unmoving stone—as others race towards him and attempt to kill him.

Just as director Stephen Norrington used fast-motion photography to express how the human world might look to eternal vampires in *Blade*, this technique by Carpenter seems to achieve the same result, by opposite ends. The dissolve transitions in a fight scene reveal how the vampire world seems timeless, unmoving, to the humans countenancing the Master.

Apparent in *John Carpenter's Vampires* is the deliberate and loving re-working of *Rio Bravo*, which Carpenter also remade, in part, in *Assault on Precinct 13* and *Prince of Darkness* and which he would

return to yet again in 2001's *John Carpenter's Ghosts of Mars*.

Here, Hawks' Western is re-parsed mostly in terms of the bantering male characters in the film. The heroic troika of Sheriff Chance (John Wayne), Deputy Dude (Dean Martin) and Stumpy (Walter Brennan) is re-formed here as Crow (Woods), Montoya (Baldwin) and Guiteau (Guinee). Like the Chance-Dude relationship, the Crow-Guiteau one is not without its up and downs: Guiteau must fight hard to earn Crow's respect, and at first the young priest takes some real verbal abuse from the vampire killer.



Jack Crow (James Woods, center) probes the dark interior of a vampire nest in the tense opening scene of *John Carpenter's Vampires* (1998).

Another *Rio Bravo* dynamic re-parsed here is the idea of "men's men" who respect each other despite problems and differences. Montoya isn't a drunk like Dude, but he's almost as bad, developing the virus called "vampirism." Both men are limited in their effectiveness by a sickness.

John Carpenter's Vampires' major set-piece is a battle inside a ghost town police facility with a jail, and it too brings back memories of the Hawks film. In *Rio Bravo*, Wayne's nemesis, Burdette, repeatedly attempts to break into jail to free his incarcerated brother. In *Vampires*, Crow is the attacker, dragging sleeping vampires out into daylight.

One element of *John Carpenter's Vampires* that I did not like upon a first viewing in 1998 involves Jack Crow's raw, over-the-top dislike of everyone and everything. He is misogynist, a misanthrope, arrogant, brutal, sacrilegious and antisocial, virtually daring the audience to identify with him.

Gazing back after a dozen years, however, and in the context of the 1990s, it is not difficult to see Crow's characteristics as maverick Carpenter's statement against political correctness in cinema. Here, he goes against the grain with a lead character that verbally upbraids everyone around him and has never said a politically correct thing in his life. Considered in this light, Jack's bad attitude perhaps serves a larger purpose.

As I've written elsewhere in this book, the 1990s was a time in which vampires were looking for new relevance in the pop culture. John Carpenter had never directed a movie about vampires before this effort, and the admirable thing about his interpretation is that the vampires and their world seem believable. They are like, for lack of a better word, nomadic drug addicts, cockroaches holed up in abandoned, out-of-the-way hole-in-the-walls. The creatures are not romanticized in any significant way—they don't wear "rented formal wear" or have "Euro-trash accents"—as Jack notes.

Instead, they are a bottom-feeding scavenger race, living off the rundown end of the human world. I love that the film suggests that the men who hunt them are not a whole lot better: they're a whoring, drinking, foul-mouthed bunch. And when they line up vampire skulls on the hood of their weapons van, you even feel a little sorry for these vampire cockroaches.

A film made with gusto, glee and no small amount of skill, *John Carpenter's Vampires* is a much stronger film than I first assessed it over a decade ago. Like virtually every John Carpenter film ever made, it has aged gracefully, and Carpenter's grounding in film grammar gives the movie a neo-classic appeal. James Woods makes for an unforgettable vampire slayer, and Thomas Ian Griffith exudes menace as the master vampire (and eroticism too, especially when he sinks his fangs into Sheryl Lee's luscious thigh).

If there is any legitimate complaint about the film today, it is that some of the dialogue seems obvious and stilted. Guinee's line about the vampires being "unstoppable" unless he and Jack "stop them" is just one terrible line among many, but John Carpenter still makes *Vampires* fly where it counts: with the electrifying visuals.

LEGACY: A direct-to-video sequel to *Vampires*, called *Los Muertos*, followed in 2002.

***The Last Broadcast* * * ***

Critical Reception

"Toward the end of *The Last Broadcast*, the filmmakers run out of inventiveness. You'll figure out the 'shocking' finale about 10 minutes before its revealed (especially when the movie steals greedily from a hit movie that starred Kevin Costner), but *The Last Broadcast* is an entertaining film up until then."—Chris Hewitt, *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, " *The Last Broadcast*," October 22, 1998

"... *Broadcast* delivers some creepy moments until it shoots itself in the footage with a ridiculous ending."—Maitland McDonagh, *Movie Lust*, Sasquatch Books, 2006, page 64

Cast and Crew

CAST: David Beard (David Leigh); James Seward (Jim Suerd); Stefan Avalos (Steven Aukast); Lance Wesler (Wheeler); Rein Clabbes (Rein Claskin); Michele Pulaski (Michelle Monarch); Tom Brunt (Tom Branski); Mark Rublee (Claire Deforest); Dale Worstall (Dr. Dale Orstall); Sam Wells (Sam Woods).

CREW: Wavelength Releasing presents a film by Stefan Avalos and Lance Weiler. *Musical Ambience:* AD Roso, Stefan Avalos. *Photographed by:* Lance Weiler. *Film Editor:* Stefan Avalos. *Written, produced and directed by:* Stefan Avalos, Lance Weiler. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Filmmaker David Leigh (Beard) recounts the story of four men from the *Fact or Fiction* TV show who went in search for the Jersey Devil in New Jersey's Pine Barrens. Three men disappeared, and one of them, Jim Suerd (Seward) was convicted of murdering the

others. David's investigation goes behind-the-scenes of the program, to a video-reconstruction expert who believes she may be able to find at least one video "frame" of the real murderer's face.

COMMENTARY: Lance Weiler and Stefan Avalos' low-budget production *The Last Broadcast* has often been compared to 1999's *The Blair Witch Project*. In particular, audiences who don't like *The Blair Witch Project* and feel it was overhyped tend to point to *The Last Broadcast* as an earlier and superior entry of the "found footage" genre.

Their argument goes something like this: *The Blair Witch Project* wasn't even original! A film made a year earlier also involved a camera crew and a local legend! So not only did *The Blair Witch Project* suck ... it was a copycat!

Of course, that's manipulating the facts. For one thing, *The Last Broadcast* is not entirely a found-footage film in the style of *The Blair Witch Project*, so the styles are not at all identical. For instance, *The Last Broadcast* very ably and interestingly crafts its narratives from a multitude of diverse viewpoints including the found footage of a cable show's doomed trip to the Pine Barrens, the black-and-white police interrogation video of murder suspect Jim Suerd, footage of the documentary being crafted by film narrator David Leigh, the audio of Jim's 911 call, and so-forth. These varied perspectives have different originators, and arise from different times in the history of the *Fact or Fiction* murder case.

By contrast, *The Blair Witch Project* consists entirely of found footage from two video cameras, and all that footage is confined to one 1994 weekend trip in the woods.

The Last Broadcast's multi-tiered approach proves a fascinating update of Akira Kurosawa's *Roshomon* since, like that film, it attempts to determine the truth of a specific event (again a murder) utilizing different perspectives. Here, however, we don't get four characters and four traditional "personal" viewpoints. Instead, we are provided various "high tech" recordings from different sources. Our job is to piece them together and figure out what happened to those two likable cable TV hosts who died under horrible circumstances in the Pine Barrens.

Also unlike *The Blair Witch Project*, *The Last Broadcast* isn't truly about the supernatural in any substantive fashion. While it is true that

the cable hosts disappeared and then died while hunting a "local legend" (the Jersey Devil), this is only a minor subplot. As the movie reaches its final act, we learn that there is a very human source of the evil, and accordingly the film does not dwell on Jersey Devil history, characteristics or behavior. The Jersey Devil is also not involved in any murder, crime, or in the narrative's outcome. It's simply the reason the hosts of *Fact or Fiction* are out in the woods.

Again, the Blair Witch seems to have been a prime factor in *The Blair Witch Project*, at least from one perspective.

These observations are not meant to imply that *The Last Broadcast* is a poor film, only to note that the effort doesn't exactly fit the bill of being the "originator" of the material that so brilliantly informs *The Blair Witch Project*, as many disaffected film fans have erroneously suggested. That point is worth debunking.

Instead, *The Last Broadcast* features its own unique style and aura. What it truly seems to examine is the way that high-tech equipment of the 1990s can be subverted to skew audience beliefs in one desired direction or another.

Take, for instance, the section in the film that notes how the jury saw an "edit" of footage from the Pine Barrens, one prepared by the prosecution to explicitly make Jim (accused of murder and on trial) look like an intemperate, dangerous, unstable person. This image of Jim is clearly manipulated, and *The Last Broadcast* makes the case that, perhaps, Jim was just method acting all along, that he was seizing on his fifteen minutes of fame and crafting an original character. This is not a small matter, either, given the direction of American pop culture.

In the year 2000, so-called "Reality TV" came on hard, and many shows such as *Survivor*, *Temptation Island* and *The Apprentice* were edited so as to make certain "competitors" appear more blood-thirsty, cut-throat, what have you. The TV audience needed people to hate, and certain competitors, willfully fulfilling that role, played along, playing up the very qualities that made them "popular" as people the audience loved to hate.

Think Richard Hatch on *Survivor* or Omarosa on *The Apprentice*.

The irony here, of course, is that this is supposed to be "reality" TV. But in virtually every incarnation of the reality show format, there seems a pull for the people involved to make it more traditionally dramatic, to make it a battle of good guys vs. bad guys. The result is exactly what *The Last Broadcast* suggested in 1998: that truth in video and film "ultimately is what the filmmaker perceives as the truth."

In other words: biased towards a particular point of view.

In some significant way, *The Last Broadcast* examines the way that footage can be manipulated to suggest good or bad, innocence or guilt, but all according to one person (or one side's) specific belief system. People who watch Fox News will understand this immediately.

And again, the 1990s was also the decade of the O.J. Simpson murder trial. There, the whole enterprise ultimately hung on one image: a glove that was too small for Simpson's hands. It made for excellent theater, but what the audience could not know were the details. Had time in storage caused the glove to shrink for its show-stopping appearance as evidence? Was it the correct glove? Had Simpson worn a too-small glove to commit the crime in the first place? Or was the glove planted, and Simpson really innocent?

All we know for certain is the showmanship, not the "truth." But the showmanship, in this case, was enough to carry the day. *If it does not fit, you must acquit.*

The Last Broadcast also comments on the "anonymous"—and dangerous?—nature of the Internet, and how it can lead to problems. Here, an anonymous reader on the *Fact or Fiction's* IRC (Internet Chat) suggests a trip to the Pine Barrens to find the Jersey Devil. That very soul, that "chatter," we later learn, laid a trap for the film crew upon their arrival at the Pine Barrens. He suggested the trip, and then murdered the production team. Then, he made a documentary about their murders, thus assuring himself his own fifteen minutes of fame.

The only reason that this plan is actually revealed to us is that the killer must act again to prevent a "data retrieval specialist" named Michelle from uncovering his recognizable image from a scrambled piece of recovered footage.

With the film's out-and-out revelation of the culprit, *The Last Broadcast* seems, in the final analysis, to go wrong since it answers virtually all audience questions with clear, indisputable conclusions.

Unlike *The Blair Witch Project*, which ends in terrifying ambiguity, *The Last Broadcast* provides a good long look at its villain, and allows the audience to assemble all the pieces of this particular puzzle.

In that way, it doesn't mirror real life so well, where the answers often rest, in the terminology of the film, "in static." It doesn't help either that *The Last Broadcast* isn't particularly well-performed, which, not to sound like a broken record, also differentiates it from the film it is most often compared to.

Still, *The Last Broadcast* is a good horror movie that looks warily at media manipulation at the turn of the century. It obsesses on our "high tech age," and weaves a tapestry from many sources (archival footage, etc.) in an unconventional and fresh way. This may be the first movie to incorporate Internet chats, cable access footage, 911 calls and other diverse sources into one wideranging, coherent and impressive narrative. Made on a low budget, the film is thus both a pioneer and a triumph.

But make no mistake, the triumph of *The Last Broadcast* in no way undercuts or devalues what *The Blair Witch Project* achieved. That's a facile talking point from people looking to dismiss a film they didn't like and somehow hoped to disqualify it from serious consideration as a great and original horror masterpiece of the nineties.

The comparison does a disservice to both films, especially when both films are good ones. *The Last Broadcast* is a study of how modern technology can deceive the eye and ears. *The Blair Witch Project* concerns instead how such technology creates a level of distance from real life, and therefore a sense of protected arrogance in the people who use it.

Nightwatch * * *

Critical Reception

"A lot of the fun in *Nightwatch* is seeing how director Ole Bornedal is able to creep you out without doing anything but tease and suggest. Most scary movies are about the jump, the scream, the actual moment of fright. *Nightwatch* is about the dread before the scare. It's a horror movie about anticipation."—Rene Rodriguez, *The Miami Herald*, "Nightwatch," April 16, 1998

"... the film finds its God in the details, many of them furnished by director of photography Dan Laustsen. Moths fluttering about in an overhead lamp is an eerie motif. Shadows fall in the perfect nook and crannies. In all, the film does a great job of putting us in the middle of its milieu: a dark, lonely

building full of dead people. It's the live ones who aren't fresh or interesting enough to close the deal; even with a screenwriting hand from Steven Soderbergh, these folks tend to spin their wheels."—Chris Vognar, *The Dallas Morning News*, "Nightwatch," April 16, 1998

Cast and Crew

CAST: Ewan McGregor (Martin Bells); Patricia Arquette (Katherine); Josh Brolin (James); Lauren Graham (Marie); Nick Nolte (Cray); Brad Dourif (Duty Doctor); Anais Evans (Leanne); Alix Koromzny (Joyce); Larry Cedar (Writer); John C. Reilly (Partner).

CREW: Dimension Films Presents a Michael Obel Production, a Bornedal Film. *Casting:* Rick Pagano. *Produced by:* Daniel Lupi. *Music:* Joachem Halbek. *Costume Designer:* Laura Mingenbach. *Film Editor:* Sally Menke. *Production Designer:* Richard Hoover. *Director of Photography:* Dan Laustsen. *Executive Producers:* Bob and Harvey Weinstein, Cary Granat. *Written by:* Ole Bornedal, Steven Soderbergh. *Produced by:* Michael Obel. *Directed by:* Ole Bornedal. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: As a serial killer murders prostitutes after making them "play dead," a young law student, Martin (McGregor), gets a job as the night watchman at a creepy old morgue. Martin and his irresponsible, reckless friend James (Brolin) begin to play a game with a hooker named Joyce (Koromzny), but when she turns up dead at the old morgue—and worse, sexually violated—the authorities, led by Detective Cray (Nolte), begin to take a second look at Martin.



Martin (Ewan McGregor) wonders what's in the jars in Ole Bornedal's remake, *Nightwatch* (1998).

COMMENTARY: Although a remake of his own 1994 film, *Nattevagten*, Ole Bornedal's Americanized *Nightwatch* is plainly an inferior work. A crucial element of the narrative has been downplayed this time, the "game" of dares between two law students, Martin and James, and the result is that the original film's contextual undercurrent, of unfettered freedom leading ultimately to perversion and violence, gets sacrificed.

In the original film, the James character, called Jens, invited his friend Martin to a series of challenges designed to allow these two men to enjoy their remaining freedom before settling down. Importantly, Jens was anticipating his upcoming wedding and felt that marriage represented an end to youthful indiscretion.

In the remake, all of this is wiped out, or merely hinted at in oblique fashion. Instead of playing a consistent game with Martin, James merely comes across as a surly bully, one who enjoys intimidating others and breaking bad.

For his part, Martin is made in the remake to be much more likeable, and much more heroic. He is dragged, kicking and screaming, into his encounter with Joyce ... the hand-job-by-prostitute is literally forced upon him. And Martin doesn't even engage in sex with his girlfriend in the morgue.

Again, all this represents a definite shift away from the source material and changes the very nature and point of the movie. The subtext is entirely lost. When the movie gets to the climax and Martin

declares, "let's grow old together ... that's the challenge," it seems he's referring simply to a conversation in a bar from early in the film (during which James notes cryptically that his girlfriend is "less receptive" than she used to be about certain things), not a character arc, not a movie-long escalation of challenges.

This American remake also adopts more moves from the familiar serial killer paradigm playbook. The killer has an exaggerated tell, depicted *ad nauseum*, his affection for the song "Hokey Pokey" at crime scenes. And the movie attempts to make James out as the killer, a red herring, too, and one that the first film never attempted. The female characters, Katherine and Marie, are shunted into the background, leaving more time for "star" Nick Nolte and the police procedural aspect of the production.

And since we do have a "star" here, it's not hard to determine how Nolte is involved in the proceedings (see: *Jennifer 8* for the same serial killer-styled resolution).



Martin (McGregor) and James (Josh Brolin) are best friends playing a game in *Nightwatch*. (1998).

Despite all of these alterations, *Nightwatch* is an entertaining, unchallenging horror film. In part this is because Bornedal, the second time around, is even better at staging the fifteenminute tour of the morgue facility. As is the case in the original, this film generates a real sense of aloneness during this opening gambit—of being awake while the rest of the world sleeps and that feeling of not quite believing your eyes or ears when something out of the ordinary happens.

These scenes play deeply on our fear of dead bodies and of being

alone in the dark. Boredal's camera stalks Martin on his rounds and the audience gets a sense of his efforts to make the uncomfortable and unsavory seem routine. Of course, one can argue that the first *Nightwatch* did all this with equal dexterity and to the same effect. That's true, but this *Nightwatch* is still remarkably well-made and all the scares are just as effective the second time around, even if much of the movie's meaning has been removed, or at least downplayed to a remarkable extent.

Nightwatch didn't really need an American remake. The original didn't suffer in any sense (visually or narratively) from a lack of funds, so throwing money at the property here doesn't really enhance the film to any great degree. Ewan Mc-Gregor, Patricia Arquette and James Brolin do a good job with their characters, but they are playing people more formulaic and less intriguing than the original cast did in 1994.

For all their third act revisions, the American remakes of *The Vanishing* (1993) and *Diabolique* (1996) at least added a twist or new direction to the plot, love it or hate it. The remade *Nightwatch* simply subtracts much of the meaning and characterization of the story, leaving a lean, highly-visual and atmospheric movie, but one starkly lacking substantive human drama.

So what you're left with from *Nightwatch* is an inferior variation on a theme. It's still a good, entertaining serial killer movie, especially for those who haven't seen the original effort, but my deepest recommendation is a simple one. See the original.

***Phantasm IV: Oblivion* * * ***

Critical Reception

"I can understand the complaints about this one's oddball, non-linear structure and its many ambiguities, but with Coscarelli's plans for an ambitious, big-budget final chapter repeatedly falling apart at the last minute, you have to give the guy points for making the best of a bad situation. If this is Plan B, it's a damned entertaining Plan B, and the employment of unused footage from the original *Phantasm*—thereby giving us a single actor (Baldwin) appearing at the ages of twelve and thirty-three in the same film—isn't just novel, it's downright ingenious."—John Bowen, *Rue Morgue*

"An improvement over its predecessor, and nice to see some old 1970s footage incorporated into the increasingly convoluted story-line, but the series was getting tired here, and it's probably a good thing the series ended after this one."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

Cast and Crew

CAST: A. Michael Baldwin (Mike); Reggie Bannister (Reggie); Bill Thornbury (Jody); Angus Scrimm (Tall Man); Heidi Marnhout (Jennifer) Bob Ivy (Demon Troop).

CREW: Silver Sphere Company presents a Don Coscarelli film. *Special Make-up Effects:* KNB EFX Group, Inc. *Sphere Effects:* D. Kelly Prior. *Costume Designer:* Shelley Kay. *Production Designer:* Naython Vane. *Music and Dwarf Creature Voices:* Christopher L. Stone. *Additional Music:* Steven Morrell. *Director of Photography:* Chris Chomyn. *Film Editor:* Scott J. Gill. *Co-Producer:* A Michael Baldwin. *Written, produced and directed by:* Don Coscarelli. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 90 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Mike (Baldwin) undergoes a journey of discovery about himself and the Tall Man (Scrimm), one that takes him to the past and to the beginning of the horror. Meanwhile, Reggie (Bannister) attempts to rescue Mike, only to see his efforts frustrated by the forces of evil.

COMMENTARY: Highlighting a sad, elegiac mood, Don Coscarelli's final *Phantasm* film, *Oblivion*, is another feather in the director's cap, especially since this sequel was produced on what can only be described as a micro-budget.

Coscarelli's commitment to the original franchise actors, who all began in their roles nearly two decades before this film, remains part of the reason for the movie's ultimate success. As viewers, we have grown to care about these heroes, especially as they age and grow. In the epoch of re-boots, re-imagination and re-set buttons, Coscarelli's dedication to characters, to performers, to an expansive, epic storyline, pays off. Not in a glorious, spectacular or even particularly horrifying way, but in a surprising, intimate one.

As *Phantasm IV: Oblivion* begins, there's a sense of melancholy and of the end nearing. "The towns have all been abandoned," a voice-over narration informs the audience, and the camera speeds along a lonely road at night; only the yellow dividing line is visible to keep the characters company on this dark journey.

Then, Coscarelli begins to alternate between new footage filmed for *Oblivion* and unused clips from the original *Phantasm* (1979). This approach may make the film sound like a "clips" movie, but that's not the case at all. Instead, the old footage and new footage complement each other, revealing the stages of a long journey. And that's ultimately the point of the film: what a long, strange journey this has been.

Thus we see all the beloved *Phantasm* characters, even the Tall Man, in different historical periods, countenancing different emotions and phenomena. One image in this sequel is especially potent and touching: that of Reggie, Jody and Michael, grown-up and middle aged, relaxing on the hood of a car, drinking beers, playing music and just fooling around, enjoying the fellowship of one another.

It's the future that is not to be, the future that was denied them by the Tall Man. In the terminology of the popular genre TV series

Lost (2004– 2010), it's a flash-sideways.



Boy! The Tall Man (Angus Scrimm) makes his curtain call in *Phantasm IV: Oblivion* (1998).

Released in 1998, *Phantasm IV: Oblivion* definitely boasts a fin de siècle tone, and Coscarelli lives in that mood of unsettled closure. "You're killing the world," one character says to The Tall Man, and that observation is just about right. The end is near (the towns are all abandoned), and so all Michael can do is "go back to the beginning, where it all started." There, in the past, he meets Jebidiah Morningside, the inventor who first opened the door to the Tall Man, and who lost control of his very corporeality to the boogeyman.

Oblivion closely examines the friendship between Mike and Reggie too, and there's some touching 1970s-era footage of Mike, on an abandoned street, apparently frightened. Then, the kindly ice cream man, Reggie, shows up and things are suddenly okay. Again, such fleeting visions of youth and of apparent "normal life" make this sequel feel authentic and heartfelt. There's something so sad and lonely about young Mike alone on that street. It's an image that is hard to shake.

Clearly, there was no money for much action here, and nothing involving the Tall Man or the end of life on Earth is really resolved satisfactorily by movie's end. One action scene on the road, Reggie vs. a Demon Cop, is played at great length, a one-on-one physical contest.

But it's a pretty lame scene. It's obvious the movie can afford no more than a few bad guys, a few stunts, a few bursts of well-depicted horror.

But again, that's okay. The world itself may be going out with a whimper in *Oblivion*, but the *Phantasm* series goes out with a bang of heartfelt emotions. A big budget, a spectacular battle, may not have captured this melancholy feeling nearly as well.

Phantoms * *¹/₂

Cast and Crew

CAST: Peter O'Toole (Timothy Flyte); Rose McGowan (Lisa Pailey); Joanna Going (Jennifer Pailey); Ben Affleck (Sheriff Bryce Hamond); Liev Schreiber (Stu Wargle); Nicky Katt (Steve Shanning); Clifton Powell (General Copperfield); Rachel Shane (Yamaguci); Michael DeLorenzo (Velazquez); Rick Otto (Lockland); Adam Nelson (Burke); John Hammill (Talbot); John Scott Clough (Shane); Rob Knepper (Agent Wilson); Paul Schmidt (Church Soldier); Bob Hopkins (Hawthorne); Luke Eberl (Tunnel Boy).

CREW: Dimension Films, in association with Fuji Creative Corporation presents a Neo Motion Pictures Presentation in association with Raven House, Inc. *Casting:* Don Phillips. *Costume Designer:* Dana C. Litwack. *Visual Effects Consultant:* Richard Greenberg, Bruce Schluter. *Production Designers:* Deborah Raymond, Dorian Vernacchio. *Music:* David Williams. *Film Editor:* Randolph K. Bricker. *Director of Photography:* Richard Clabargh. *Co-Executive Producers:* Yoji Kurkoami, Andrew Rona, Richard Potter. *Executive Producers:* Bob and Harvey Weinstein, Dean Koontz. *Produced by:* Robert Pringle, Steven Land. *Produced by:* Joel Soisson, Michael Leahy. *Based upon the book* Phantoms *by:* Dean Koontz. *Screenplay by:* Dean Koontz. *Directed by:* Joe Chappelle. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 91 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A doctor, Jennifer Pailey (Going), and her younger sister, Lisa (McGowan), move to the scenic town of Snowfield only to find the residents dead, apparently of some odd affliction. The sisters meet with Sheriff Hammond (Affleck) and two deputies and attempt to

solve the mystery. The Army flies in Timothy Flyte (O'Toole), a man who believes that an "Ancient Enemy"—one that destroyed the Mayan culture and is responsible for the disappearance of the colony at Roanoke— is responsible for the town's destruction. Before long, the Paileys, Bryce and Flyte confront a shapeshifting entity that devours all life and absorbs the memories and dreams of those it consumes. This Ancient Enemy believes itself a God, but Flyte has a plan to destroy before it renders man extinct.

COMMENTARY: The Gaia Hypothesis, the belief that the Earth is actually a single organism, is one that grew in popularity in the 1990s, especially following a conference among scientists on the topic in San Diego in 1989. *Phantoms* is a horror movie based on a Dean Koontz novel that suggests something along similar lines: a vast, subterranean entity as the Earth's oldest living creature (see also: *The X-Files: Fight the Future*).



Sheriff Hamond (Ben Affleck, center) confronts an ancient evil in Snowfield, bracketed by two survivors Lisa (Rose McGowan, left) and Jennifer (Joanna Going) in *Phantoms* (1998).

According to the movie, this is the very entity responsible for numerous disappearances over the long years, including of the

Roanoke Colony, a Maya city in 610 A.D. and a Chinese Army in Nanking in 1339. It also wiped out the dinosaurs. And as *Phantoms* begins, the creature is back and it has destroyed a modern, western American town.

What remains most interesting about this monster is that the so-called "Ancient Enemy" absorbs both flesh and knowledge when it devours humans. It thus has access to the full range of human history, literature and myth. This means the monster can make manifest horrifying bad dreams or nightmares. This means the monster can speak to you in the voice of your son, your wife, your mother, and your father. To steal a phrase from *Poltergeist*, it knows what scares you.

But the really interesting, and almost subtextual element of *Phantoms* involves the fact that the Ancient Enemy, having recently devoured these modern Americans, now wants two things.

One, it wants to be considered a God.

And second, it wants to be famous.

To these ends, it contacts a tabloid writer, Dr. Flyte (Peter O'Toole), and demands that he writes its "Gospel." In other words, "Tell the World."

The idea of an ancient, inhuman creature discovering concepts like religion and fame is a really good one. Also powerful is the speculation, briefly touched upon, about the Ancient Enemy's victims. If knowledge and memory are alive inside the beast, are the victims still conscious, essentially alive in there? Is this the final resting places of their souls? Now that's some real nightmare fodder.

It's just a shame that some of the acting here is terrible (though Ben Affleck is da bomb), and that the monster seems to select its victims nonsensically. There's one scene in which there are three unprotected leads (Affleck, McGowan, Going) and a guy in a bio-hazard suit. Guess who the Ancient Enemy goes after for absorption?

I also have some trouble with the film's finale, during which the Ancient Enemy takes the form of one of Sheriff Hamond's unpleasant memories. The lawman accidentally shot a child with a toy gun and is haunted by the experience. So the monster takes the form of that child, but I can't see how this is possible since the boy is dead, and the Ancient Enemy has not yet "sampled" or absorbed Hamond to glean his particular memories. Maybe the monster absorbed the child's corpse in the ground? That would be the only explanation that makes sense.

Phantoms starts out like *The Andromeda Strain* (1972), with

eerily-effective shots of an abandoned town, becomes a lot like the remake of *The Blob* (1988), what with men in bio-hazard suits getting sucked up by a protoplasmic monster, and its climax offers several visuals reminiscent of *John Carpenter's The Thing* (1982). Then, the twist ending evokes the coda of *The Howling* (1981).

You'd think with all those antecedents, this movie would move better or at least more confi-dently. Instead, despite some really fascinating ideas, phantoms of better horror movies haunt this movie.

***The Prophecy 2* * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christopher Walken (Gabriel); Russell Wong (Danyael); Jennifer Beals (Valerie Rosales); Brittany Murphy (Izzy); Steve Hytner (Joseph); Bruce Abbott (Thomas Daggett); William Prael (Rafayel); Glenn Danzig (Samayel); Eric Roberts (Michael); Tom Towles (Det. Waltrip); Renee Victor (Nana); J.G. Hertzler (Father William); Elizabeth Dennehy (Kathy Kimball); Danny Strong (Julian); Dave Lea (Hagil).

CREW: Dimension Films Presents in association with Overseas Film Group, a Neo Motion Picture Production. *Casting:* Mark Tillman. *Costume Designer:* Rennie Fien. *Production Designer:* Shay Austin. *Music:* David Williams. *Film Editors:* Christopher Cibelli, Ivan Ladizinsky. *Director of Photography:* Richard Clabaugh. *Associate Producer:* Matthew Greenberg. *Line Producer:* Russell D. Markowitz. *Co-Producer:* Denise Leong. *Executive Producers:* Gregory Widen, Robert Little, Bob and Harvey Weinstein. *Produced by:* Joel Soisson, W.K. Border. *Based on characters created by:* Gregory Widen. *Written by:* Matthew Greenberg, Greg Spence. *Directed by:* Greg Spence. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A nurse named Valerie (Beales) accidentally strikes an angel, Danyael (Wong), in mid-day traffic, unaware he is actually a loyal soldier in Heaven's Second War and that rebel angel leader Gabriel (Walken) has returned from his prison in Hell to launch

another campaign. Danyael impregnates Valerie so as to bring about the union of Heaven and Earth, and to inaugurate the reign of the Nephilim. Meanwhile, Gabriel resurrects a suicidal girl, Izzy (Murphy), to be his "monkey" slave on the mortal plane, and sets about stalking Valerie.

COMMENTARY: The second war in Heaven continues in *The Prophecy 2*, a satisfying sequel to the 1995 box office hit about warrior angels interfering in man's affairs. The follow-up film involves the story of an angel, Danyael, who "went into a human woman" (ahem...) and the approaching birth of a new race of hybrid beings called Nephilim. Christopher Walken's Gabriel returns because he wants to control these creatures, but it's really an excuse for more of his idiosyncratic wisecracking and scene-stealing.

The makers of *The Prophecy* films have figured out what audiences want to see in the franchise, and what it amounts to is more Christopher Walken as Gabriel. Here, the man-hating angel spends much of the film in the company of Izzy, a teenager he has resurrected after her suicide, played by the late Brittany Murphy. Many of these scenes really crackle with wit. After bringing her back from the dead, Gabriel complains that he is currently "short-staffed." And when Gabriel commands that Izzy operate a computer for instance, she replies, "So you're keeping me alive because you don't know DOS?"

The sequel also evidences more action than the previous entry. The angels duke it out in a dark alley here, and we see them leap through the air and hop from rooftop to rooftop in impressive fashion. Also, Gabriel's job description this time around apparently involves the destruction of angel corpses. Walken's trademark (and fun gesture) is a hand-kiss, which results in immediate, total, spontaneous combustion. In terms of imagination, this sequel is satisfying too. The film's finale takes Gabriel and the angels to the Garden of Eden, now a pollutionspewing industrial factory. "What a dump," quips the archangel. It's a powerful image and a powerful indictment of mankind, what he has made of this place. He's taken paradise and turned it into poison.

In terms of imagination, this sequel is satisfying too. The film's finale takes Gabriel and the angels to the Garden of Eden, now a pollutionspewing industrial factory. "What a dump," quips the archangel. It's a powerful image and a powerful indictment of mankind, what he has made of this place. He's taken paradise and

turned it into poison.

The Prophecy 2 climaxes with a literal "leap of faith," as Gabriel and the mother-to-be of the Nephilim, Jennifer Beals' Valerie, plunge from refinery spires to possible doom. Valerie has faith and survives the terrifying fall. Walken doesn't have faith and is impaled. Then God punishes him by making him the thing he hates most: a talking monkey. In *Prophecy* lingo, that means one of us.

Aside from Gabriel, the other angels in the film are pretty somber for the most part, and that can be unintentionally funny at times. Danyael makes love to Valerie, for instance, and then takes his leave of her with a simple "Be well."

That doesn't seem like a particularly godly way to behave does it? But perhaps that's the point. In *The Prophecy 2*, the angels are beginning to experience aspects of free will. Like us, they'll have to deal with the consequences of their emotional actions, I suppose.

Still, this scene (and ensuing brush-off) gives the phrase "touched by an angel" a whole new dimension.

Psycho * *

Critical Reception

"Anne Heche and Viggo Mortensen are adequate as Marion and her boyfriend, but Vince Vaughn doesn't have a shred of Anthony Perkins's demented magnetism. The best work comes from William H. Macy as the detective and Julianne Moore as Marion's feisty sister. In the end, it's hard to imagine why a smart and savvy filmmaker like Gus Van Sant would want to 're-create' this classic in the first place. There's nothing wrong with remaking a masterpiece if the goal is to put the story in a new context, a different time and place, exploring its relevance to new social and historical circumstances. Regrettably, the new *Psycho* doesn't attempt anything so ambitious"—David Sterritt, *The Christian Science Monitor*, " *Psycho* Adds Color, Lacks Purpose," December 11, 1998, Volume 91, Issue 12, page 15

"The most paradoxical aspect of this recreation is its timid fidelity to a movie that smashed the commercial conventions of its day. Thus Van Sant's *Psycho* is often surprisingly OK. It is,

after all, still *Psycho*— just a superfluous and inferior version."—
J Hoberman, *The Village Voice*, "Taking Another Stab," December
15, 1998

Cast and Crew

CAST: Vince Vaughn (Norman Bates); Julianne Moore (Lila Crane); Viggo Mortenson (Sam Loomis); William H. Macy (Milton Arbogast); Chad Everett (Tom Cassidy); Anne Heche (Marion Crane); Robert Forster (Dr. Simon); Phillip Baker Hall (Sheriff Chambers); Anne Haney (Mrs. Chambers); Rance Howard (Mr. Lowery); Rita Wilson (Caroline); James Remar (Patrolman); James Le Gros (Car Dealer); Flea (Bob Summerfield).

CREW: Imagine Entertainment and Universal Pictures Presents a film by Gus Van Sant. *Casting:* Howard Feuer. *Music Adapted by:* Danny Elfman, Steve Bartek. *Costume Designer:* Beatrix Arian Pasztor. *Film Editor:* Amy E. Duddleston. *Production Designer:* Tom Foden. *Director of Photography:* Christopher Doyle. *Executive Producer:* Danny Wolf. *Produced by:* Brian Grazer, Gus Van Sant. *Screenplay by:* Joseph Stefano. *Directed by:* Gus Van Sant. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 104 minutes.

P.O.V.: "For 50% of the current movie going audience, there's something antiquated about a movie that was made almost 40 years ago in black and white."⁷³—Gus Van Sant describes the reason to remake a classic

SYNOPSIS: Plucky Marion Crane (Heche) steals \$400,000 on the job over the romantic fantasy that she and her lover, Sam Loomis (Mortenson), could share a life of wealth together. She takes to the road and stops on a rainy night at the out-of-the-way Bates Motel, run by lanky, twitchy Norman Bates (Vaughn). Norman claims to live in the house by the motel with his sick mother, and it is his sick mother, apparently, who murders Marion in the shower. Later, Marion's sister, Lila (Moore), a detective named Arbogast (Macy) and Sam

(Mortensen) follow Marion's trail back to the Bates Motel, where a surprise awaits in the basement.

COMMENTARY: Hollywood goes a little mad sometimes.

There are a million-and-one reasons why Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) didn't need to be remade. Prime among these is the fact that the narrative hinges on surprise, twists and narrative fake-outs. On a first viewing, audiences were shocked when lead actress Janet Leigh, playing Marion Crane, was butchered in the shower half-way through the proceedings. They were even more atwitter when their new object of identification, lonely boy Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins), turned out to be her schizophrenic murderer. And the all-important money, which viewers hoped would have saved Norman from "Mother," turned out to be nothing but a red herring. And Mother?

A skeleton rotting in the basement.

The updated *Psycho* by Gus Van Sant changes not a one of these twists nor does it update a single important narrative point (beyond the moist thwacking sound of Norman masturbating while ogling Marion through a peephole). In fact, the new *Psycho* is a shot-for-shot remake of the original, so it isn't as if

Van Sant, a capable director, puts his own spin or perspective on the same narrative. He's simply recreating what Alfred Hitchcock had already created. Only with different actors, a few updates in technology, and in color.

Those behind the new *Psycho* argue that they have brought the film to a new audience, one which had no familiarity with Norman's story or the Hitchcock film. Fine. If that's the goal, then re-release the original *Psycho* for a limited run. When you want to introduce a generation to *A Catcher in the Rye*, you don't rewrite the book ... you haul out J.D. Salinger's original. When you want to introduce a generation to *Macbeth*, you don't recreate it in modern English, you pull the play, replete with iambic pentameter, down off the shelf. Movies are no different. You don't remake *Birth of a Nation* to introduce it to Generation Y ... you screen the original.



Norman Bates (Vince Vaughn) sits under Mamma Bates' window in the remake of *Psycho* (1998).



Norman Bates (Vaughn) greets Marion Crane (Anne Heche) at the Bates Motel in Gus Van Sant's *Psycho*.

Remakes have been around for a long while, and many are quite good. But most of the remakes that are quite good are ones that re-interpret the material in some new fashion, or go back to source material. John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982) went back to the short story "Who Goes There," not the Hawks film of the 1950s, and carved a niche for itself. The 1970s version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* contextualized its alien invasion as being part of the "self help," "Me Generation," a new context differing greatly from the 1950s Red Scare idea.

But Gus Van Sant's *Psycho* is the same screenplay—the same shots ... without a recontextualization for the 1990s. The result: it doesn't feel any newer or fresher than Hitchcock's *Psycho* feels in this day and age, and that would have been the only point in remaking it.

Could *Psycho* have been updated? Yes. The original coda with the psychiatrist explaining Norman's mental deterioration was always heavyhanded and stilted. Today—after a decade of serial killers—the audience doesn't need the exposition. But Van Sant gives it to us anyway.

Even areas where technology has improved, Van Sant has not updated *Psycho*. All of the car rear-projection scenes look phonier in 1998 color than they did in 1960 black-and-white. And Arbogast's death in the original film—also using rear projection—hasn't been modified to seem more realistic either.

A notable exception: the opening camera push from a city skyline into a hotel room assignation has been made into one beautiful, fluid shot, something Hitchcock imagined but could not execute with camera tech in the 1960s.

And the famous shower scene? It's vivid in color, what with the red blood flowing and all, but why do it with all the shock cutting that Hitchcock used? Why not—in keeping with the more explicit times—really shock the audience and show the knife perforating flesh?

Real ingenuity is missing from Gus Van Sant's *Psycho*. At some point, early in the planning stages of the remake, someone should have asked: *how can we re-do Psycho today in a way that delivers the same gut punch that the original delivered to audiences in 1960?* A director like Rob Zombie might have been able to achieve that with his bludgeoning, deadening sense of escalating violence and corruption. But this *Psycho* comes off as an art house exercise in futility.

And it is one that is even cruel, at times, to the actors. Although Anne Heche looks like one of the stuffed and mounted birds in Norman's study, she possesses not a bit of Janet Leigh's elegance and essential sweetness. Julianne Moore is strident and shrill as Lila. And Macy's greatest contribution to the role of Arbogast is his hat.

On the other hand, Mortensen—practically reeking white-trash sexuality as Loomis—seems like a real person here and is a distinct improvement of John Gavin. He adds real steam to the early sex scene by playing it virtually nude, and hungry. As for Vaughn—who has wasted his career since this film on dumb, mass appeal comedies—he actually does a credible job of playing the jittery, giggling Norman. He isn't Perkins, but he doesn't ape Perkins, either. He's heavier and lighter than Perkins at the same time, a boy in a man's muscular body. He's serviceable, if not always impressive. It's easy to see how he could work in this role, even if it doesn't quite pan out.

Alarmingly, this new *Psycho* can't even be bothered to be

internally consistent. The opening legend informs audiences the events of the film are occurring in December of 1998, but at Al Chamber's house, an operator is needed to dial a number for the sheriff. An operator? That went out in the late 1970s. And how come nobody—especially an on-the-move detective like Arbogast—uses a cell phone?

And if this is to be a shot-by-shot remake of *Psycho*, why add the jump-cut flashes of a cow on the highway or a blindfolded woman during moments of extreme violence? If *Psycho* is to be treated so reverentially, in shot-for-shot mode, why change the appearance of the iconic Bates house?

To enjoy this version of *Psycho*, you have to be a total Hitchcock virgin. But this is the dilemma: if you are a Hitchcock virgin, you're better off watching the Hitchcock *Psycho*. It will open up an amazing new world to you, something that this remake most definitely will not.

And that paradox leaves this bizarre, inconsistent experiment no room to succeed, and more so, no reason to exist.

A shot-for-shot remake of *Psycho* is a poor substitute for the original.

***Psycho Sisters* ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christine Taylor (Jane Sicole); Pamela Sutch (Jackie Sicole); Tina Krause (Janice Sicole); Peter Kerr (Jack the Rapist); Dave Di Venti (Guy in Car); Michael Reim (Pizza Guy); Darren Ross (The Jock); Ron Poole (Jogger); Nancy Allison (Christine); Giovannia Andrisani (Albie); Anthony Bruno (Todd); Peter Jacelone (Dr. Lawrence).

CREW: E.I Independent Cinema Presents *Psycho Sisters*. *Casting:* Bradley Baron. *Music:* Scott Brandt. *Director of Photography:* Timothy Healy. *Film Editor:* Frank Terranova. *Written by:* James L. Edwards, Peter Jacelone. *Produced by:* Peter Jacelone, Michael Raso, Gary Whitson. *Directed by:* Peter Jacelone and Michael Raso. *MPAA Rating:* NC-17. *Running time:* 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Two sisters, Jane and Jackie, are released from the Lawrence Psychiatric Institute after their sister was raped and murdered. Now, the girls are killing men left and right, in a vendetta against the entire sex. The crimes become known as the College Boy Murders, and the police investigate. Meanwhile, a gang of motorcyclists also grows angry when two of their own are targeted and killed, and Jackie (Sutch) begins to fall for a sperm bank employee, Todd (Bruno), riling Jane.

COMMENTARY: A weak police procedural and serial killer film with a heavy rape and revenge angle, *Psycho Sisters* fails to understand that the best way to combat misogyny is to do what *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* TV series did. Not make a film or TV show in which women act as stupidly and as violently as men often do, but one in which women are fully-developed, human characters ... believable people the audience can identify and empathize with.

Instead, *Psycho Sisters* gets it jollies by focusing on two murderous sisters, Jane and Jackie. Jane hates all men pathologically. They are rotten and completely useless, she says. Thus she abducts them, beats them and murders them. In one scene clearly inspired by the Lorena Bobbitt case in Virginia, an angry woman cuts off the penis of her unfaithful husband on-camera. This is Jane's mother, so at least Jane came by it honestly.

Amidst all the silliness and extreme gore, *Psycho Sisters* is actually about something. Late in the film, Jackie (Sutch) begins to move away from Jane's man-hating, violent dogma. Against the beliefs of her family, as it were, she experiments by having a relationship with a man, Todd.

Here, the movie seems to note that part of maturity involves leaving behind the assumptions you learned in childhood and questioning the way parents or siblings do things. It's a good idea, but it doesn't make up for a ridiculous, poorlystaged movie.

For instance, the police and the gay-bashing motorcycle gang show up at Todd's house just as he is making love to Jackie. Jane is there too, surreptitiously killing off Todd's buddies. Gunshots are fired, and Todd goes out to see what's happening. The police accidentally shoot him in the head when a gang member basically

uses him as a human shield. But Todd starts his fall in the living room, and ends it back in the bed room, where Jackie mourns over his body. There's not even any light coming in from the living room, so it's as if the dead guy just materialized from one room to the other.

Every now and then, *Psycho Sisters* offers a funny line, but it doesn't do a good job of maintaining an internal or consistent sense of reality. One scene features a tabloid reporter sincerely informing a police lieutenant that she believes that the ghost of Shirley Hemphill, of *What's Happening* fame, is the college boy slasher. In one of the very next scenes, she's depicted as a dominatrix who abuses her peeping husband for his voyeuristic tendencies. There's no sense of consistency of character, even from one scene to the next.

The movie also has a lot of gay bashing language in it, without any real purpose. For instance, the motorcyclists convince themselves that their comrades were murdered by "some fucking queers" and determine to go out and "kill all the fucking queers" they can find. In another scene, Jane denies being a lesbian. "Just because I hate men doesn't mean I want to munch-carpet," she states. It's unnecessarily crude, and really not on point with the movie's big ideas.

In the case of *Psycho Sisters*, insanity is the diagnosis. Watching a better movie is the cure.

Ringu * * *^{1/2}

Critical Reception

"I happen to be in the admittedly small camp of those who prefer the American remake, *The Ring*, to the Japanese original. Nevertheless, this film has great power to frighten, and I can't deny its important role in helping popularize Asian horror films in the United States."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Nanako Matsushima (Reiko); Hiroyuki Sanada (Ryuji); Miki Nakatani (Mai); Yuko Take-uchi (Tomoko Oishi); Hitomi Sato

(Masimi); Yochi Numata (Takashi); Yutaka Matsushiga (Yoshino); Katsuni Muramatsu (Hoichi); Rikiya Otaka (Yoichi).

CREW: Dreamworks/ACE Pictures and Omega Productions Inc., present. A film by Hideo Nakata. *Based on the novel* The Ring *by:* Koji Suzuki. *Written for the screen by:* Hiroshi Takahoshi. *Music:* Jenji Kawai. *Director of Photography:* Jun'ichiro Hayashi. *Film Editor:* Nobuyuki Takashi. *Production Designer:* Iwao Saito. *Produced by:* Shin'ya Kawai, Takenori Sentô. *Executive Producer:* Masato Hara. *Directed by:* Hideo Nakata. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 97 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A TV reporter in urban Japan, Reiko

(Masushima), tracks down an urban legend about a scary video that kills any and all watchers seven days after it is first seen. Reiko watches the video, and, unfortunately, her son does as well. The boy's father, Ryuji (Sanada), intervenes to help with the investigation, but the only possible truth here is that the video and the terrible consequences of "watching" it are very, very real.

COMMENTARY: Without exaggeration, *Ringu* is one of the most influential horror films ever made. The 1990s were the decade of the urban legend, and *Ringu* involves the person-to-person transmission of terror through a particular (fictional) urban legend. The first scene in the film sees two adolescent girls discussing a videotape that, when viewed, will result in the murder of the watcher exactly a week later.

This premise suggests a deep uneasiness with technology, and in particular, the easy access of inappropriate movies on VHS (or other formats). Furthermore, technology, particularly *the telephone*, is the vehicle through which the avenging, spectral figure makes a victim aware that death is coming. It's also impossible to ignore that the film involves the propagation of one person's terror and trauma to the masses—a metaphor for newscast broadcasts of atrocity and pain that we've seen in the modern age in times of war and in times of national crisis.

In *Ringu's* opening scene, the deadly video indeed proves fatal, and one of the girls dies horribly, though only after a splendid "false alarm" scare in which the telephone rings, jarring the girls ... but it's only Mom, checking in.

A reporter (and reporters were all the rage as lead characters in the 1990s too) begins to investigate this "viral video" and learns that it relates back to Izu Peninsula and Oshima Island. Unfortunately, both the reporter, Reiko, and her son see the video and must face their own impending death.

Viewers familiar with *The Ring* remake will be surprised to learn that this movie's mystery does not involve horses, but rather a volcano and the word "ERUPTION," that appears in the video. In common with the American remake, the film also involves a creepy little girl, here called "Sada" (or Sadako), who is orchestrating the terror. In a very, very frightening sequence, Sadako—long, stringy hair pulled down over her dead, twisted face—emerges from the television itself to claim a victim.

This image had such a great impact that the term "Japanese Water Girl" (coined by a commenter on my blog) came to categorize a whole class of J-Horror boogeymen.

Unlike the doomed boyfriend in *The Ring*, the doomed husband here, Ryuji, boasts psychic proclivities, which help with the solving of the mystery. Ryuji is much more involved in the film's action than his U.S. counterpart, even going down into the well during the film's finale to determine what has become of Sada.

In broad terms, the American *Ring* follows the outline of *Ringu*, but what it lacks in originality, it makes up for in authentic scares and atmosphere of the inevitable. *Ringu* never manages to be quite as scary as the American version that followed, but it does feature a better, more powerful ending. Reiko learns that to escape the evil of Sadako, she must pay the evil forward, like some kind of diabolical chain letter. She and her son thus dub a copy of the viral video and make certain that her not entirely sympathetic father watch it. In other words, they feed Sada a family member to save their own skins.

LEGACY: *Ringu* was sequelized in *Ringu 2*, and then remade in America in 2002 as *The Ring*, starring Naomi Watts. A sequel to that film, *The Ring 2* (2005), was also released but did not receive the critical acclaim of the earlier film. Perhaps more importantly, the success of *The Ring* started the rampant re-making of J-horror in the States in the new century. Very soon, America was mining the Japanese genre for titles including *The Grudge* (2004), *One Missed Call* (2006) and *Pulse* (2006).

The Second Arrival * (DTV)

Cast and Crew

CAST: Patrick Muldoon (Jack Addison); Michael Sarazine (Nelson Zarcoff); Jane Sibbett (Bridget Riordan); Catherine Blythe (Sandra Wolfe); Mike Scherer (Wotan); Larry Day (Burke); Steve Adams (Dave Cyrus); Stephanie Blanchette (Tom Billings); David Nerman (Newspaper Editor); Noel Burton (Convention Speaker); Mark Trafford (Bank Manager).

CREW: Live Entertainment presents a Claudio Castravelli Production, a Kevin S. Tenney Film. *Casting:* Andrea Kenyon and Associates. *Production Designer:* Jean Kazemirchuk. *Music:* Ned Bouhalassa. *Film Editor:* Heidi Harris, Gregory Fine. *Visual Effects:* Sundog Films. *Executive in Charge of Production:* Bruno Philip. *Executive Producers:* Leonard Shapiro, Jon Turtle. *Written by:* Mark David Perry. *Produced by:* Claudio Castravelli. *Directed by:* Kevin S. Tenney.

SYNOPSIS: Radio astronomer Zane Zaminsky alerted the world to the presence of aliens causing global warming, but his warning is now considered a hoax. After he dies of apparent heart attack, Zaminsky leaves a package to several individuals, including his estranged half-brother, astrophysicist Jack Addison (Muldoon). Addison begins to investigate Zane's claims of alien conspiracy with the help of a reporter, Bridget (Sibbett), and before long the aliens are after both of them with their black hole bombs and other insidious devices. Addison and Bridget believe that if they can destroy an alien-built nuclear reactor about to go online, they will significantly delay the invasion agenda.

COMMENTARY: *The Second Arrival* is a lowbudget, extremely lame continuation of the story told and resolved to satisfaction in David Twohy's paranoid and thrilling *The Arrival*. The protagonist of the previous film, Zaminsky, has been written out of the continuing story, having died at the hands of the invading aliens.

Alas, that leaves his less-intelligent halfbrother, Jack Addison

(Muldoon), to pick up the fight. I'm not just being cruel with my description, either. Jack actually describes himself in that fashion, noting that "Zane got all the smarts in the family."

Despite his thick-headedness, Jack still manages to interface with an alien virtual reality imaging system in the film ... even though he boasts zero familiarity with the alien language. Maybe he saw *Independence Day* (1996), or stayed overnight at a Holiday Inn Express.

Shot entirely in Montreal, *The Second Arrival* features bottom-drawer special effects and the slowest, most-poorly choreographed car chase you've ever seen in a major motion-picture. Much of the film's action is set around a district of empty warehouses and factories. Hilariously, NASA (or NSA, as it is called here) is depicted as a corner Mom-and-Pop storefront on an oldfashioned main street.

I knew the space program was facing budget cuts, but this is ridiculous...

The biggest problem with *The Second Arrival* is not its lack of production value, however. It's the sub-standard script that insists on talking down to the audience. For instance, the movie feels it necessary to spell out, explicitly, what the word "agenda" means.

In the age of *The X-Files*, which asked viewers to remember the complicated details of an international conspiracy week to week, year to year, integrating new information all the time, there's really no excuse for an alien conspiracy movie as dumb as this one. The movie makers have also apparently decided that global warming was too difficult a concept for general audiences to comprehend, so in this movie the aliens are opening up a new nuclear power plant instead. They intend to cause a meltdown and irradiate most of North America. How the aliens themselves would then live in this hot zone is never explained.

At the end of *The Second Arrival*, the aliens tell Jack that he has not destroyed them, only "delayed" their "agenda" (there's that word again!). This is exactly how *The Arrival* ended too, I might add. Then, forewarned, Jack and his ally Bridget, high-tail it to remote Alaska.

Where I fervently hope they shall meet the same fate as Jack's smarter brother.

The Shivers^{1/2}

Cast and Crew

CAST: Rico Love (Rudy); Nick Stodden (Jesse); Jenni Geigel (Phoenix); Ruth Adams (Sarah); Jolene Durrill (Beth); Abe Dyer (Kenny); Pat Stodden (Ebon Dread); Antwone Steele (Montell); Becky Stodden (Colleen); Rod Will (Joe); Brenna O'Brien (Skylar); Blake Washer (Shadow King).

CREW: ShockORama Productions and Extreme Entertainment present a Brian Eklund production of a Todd Sheets film. *Production Designer:* Jerry Norris. *Music:* Dan Smith Agency. *3-D Digital Creations:* Brian Eklund. *Computer Graphics and Digital Effects:* Brian Eklund. *Special Makeup Effects:* Paul Van Elzen. *Lighting Design:* Steve Greenwood. *Film Editor:* Todd Sheets. *Co-Producer:* Roger Williams. *Executive Producer:* Brian Eklund. *Written, produced and directed by:* Todd Sheets. *MPAA Rating:* NA. *Running time:* 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young driver rescues two desperate girls from a horde of evil children and a hobo, and they relate to her a strange story. The night before, the girls were invited to a party with their friends at the Dread House. Built in 1875, this was the home of Ebon Dread (Stodden), a black-magician who opened up a door to alternate, evil dimensions. On the night of the party, one of Dread's doors was re-opened and the young adults were murdered by "the ones who should not be, but are." Now, all three girls must stop Ebon before he can raise Cthulhu in the flesh, a feat made even more difficult by the fact that they may have hopped dimensions.

COMMENTARY: Todd Sheet's *The Shivers* is not a good movie in any way, shape or form. It is, like most of the director's works, essentially a highschool level production, shot cheaply on video with amateur performers and a lingering fetish for gore. Yet, *The Shivers* is certainly better than *Zombie Bloodbath*, and more than that, and uncharacteristically for such a super-low budget feature, even includes CGI effects. They aren't good effects, but still...

What may be most interesting about *The Shivers* is the way that this independent movie tries so hard to emulate big Hollywood movies rather than striking on in its own way, the very thing that might have distinguished such a lowbudget feature. For instance, *The Shivers*

includes much of the "hip" post- *Scream*- style self-reflexive dialogue and movie references of the era. In short order, the movie makes mention of *The Twilight Zone*, *The Outer Limits*, *The House on Haunted Hill*, and *Poltergeist*.

More disturbingly, without apparent credit or recognition, *The Shivers* appropriates the core elements of H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos, which were also quite popular in the genre, appearing in such 1990s fare as *Necronomicon: Book of the Dead*. So this is *In the Mouth of Madness* for the amateur set.

Also, Sheets seems consumed with 1990s political correctness. *The Shivers* highlights the adventures of a gay black man, Montell, two obese lesbians, and a young man in a wheelchair, thus hitting all the demographic bases. Commendably, Sheets doesn't discriminate in his treatment of any of them. Even the kid in the wheelchair gets killed. Oddly, his death occurs after he is given a ghostly lap dance by a spiritual stripper. She vanishes into thin air, and then suddenly he is mysteriously doused with pancake batter doubling as ectoplasm, or something.

Sheets' problem is not his imagination, which is robust, nor his storyline, which reflects his obvious passion for the genre, but instead his overwhelming ambition. This movie has literally a cast of hundreds (of fat unknowns) when it would have been better to focus on three or four young people and stick to one location, the Ebon Dread House, instead of fanning out across town. And editing is, once more, a real stumbling block for this artist.

He lets scenes play on and on and on, as if he's trying for some running time award or something. The opening scene of a car under attack by a crop of evil kids is like the Energizer bunny: it just keeps going and going. The problem with this approach is that scenes that should be razor sharp and thrilling outlast their welcome and start to feel dull. And since Sheets is using non-professional actors, the longer the scenes go on, the more opportunity there is for them to break character.

Believability is also a factor here, and I hope this doesn't sound cruel. But Ebon Dread appears with a fake mustache and starts speaking in passionate terms to a girl he has never seen before, whom the audience knows absolutely nothing about. In florid, colorful language, he says Cenobite-ish things like "I will give you a world of love. So much love that you will never want anymore." This is a hard sell, especially when the girl is no beauty queen, and actually about sixty-or-seventy pounds overweight. Why is she worthy of all the "I will give you pleasure"/"You deserve better than this" dialogue when

the other kids just get hooks in 'em, or doused in batter?

In *The Shivers*, a lot of scenes play out in this kind of meaningless, bizarre fashion. You have no idea who some of the victims are, what they are doing, or why they are getting killed in such peculiar fashion.

It must be stated, however, that every now and Sheets hits upon a striking image (and usually it has to do with his first love: gory entrails). In *The Shivers* there's one really nauseating scene wherein a pregnant young woman gives herself an abortion and then eats the fetus in front of the father. That's just not something you see every day. It has absolutely nothing to do with the rest of the movie, the self-reflexive dialogue or even the Lovecraft-ian aspects of the tale, but hell, it's bracing.

The Shivers doesn't work up even a minor case of the chills, but there's some part of you, watching it, that still—grudgingly—admires Sheets for plunging ahead with his ambitious vision here, even if he seems to definitely lack the right tools to bring everything together in a way that most audiences would even remotely recognize as a motion picture.

Species 2 * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Natasha Henstridge (Eve); Michael Madsen (Preston Lennox); Marg Helgenberger (Dr. Baker); Mykelti Williamson (Dennis Gamble); George Dundza (Colonel Burgess); James Cromwell (Senator Ross); Sarah Wynters (Melissa); Justin Lazard (Patrick Ross); Peter Boyle (Herman Crowell); Myriam Cyr (Anne); Baxter Harris (Dr. Orinsky); Richard Belzer (U.S. President).

CREW: MHM Presents a Peter Medak film. *Castings:* Amanda Mackey Johnson, Cathy Sandrich. *Music:* Edward Shearmur. *Creatures:* Steve Johnson. *Original Species Design:* H.R. Giger. *Director of Photography:* Matthew F. Leonetti. *Based on characters created by:* Dennis Feldman. *Film Editor:* Richard Nord. *Production Designer:* Miljen Kreka Jijakovic. *Executive Producer:* Dennis Feldman. *Produced by:* Frank Mancuso, Jr. *Written by:* Chris Brancato. *Directed by:* Peter Medak. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 94 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The first manned mission to Mars is a success, but on the ride back, samples collected by astronaut Patrick Ross (Lazard), son of Senator Ross (Cromwell), melt on board and an insidious alien life form is released. The crew returns to Earth with missing memories. Meanwhile, Dr. Baker (Helgenberger) has raised a clone of the alien Sil, named Eve (Henstridge), and now Eve seems aware that a male of her alien species has arrived on the planet. Preston Lennox is again assigned to hunt down the deadly alien, but this time he has to keep the male of the species (in Patrick) from mating with the female, Eve.

COMMENTARY: On July 4, 1997, the Mars Path -finder spacecraft made a successful landing on Mars, and a "rover" called Sojourner began exploring the surface of the red planet, ultimately sending back over 15,000 dazzling photographs of the rocky alien surface. The mission was also designed to analyze the climate, atmosphere and geology of Mars, and for a time Pathfinder and Sojourner captured the imagination of America, giving the space program a much-needed publicrelations boost.

The sequel to 1995's unexpected smash hit *Species* uses a manned mission to Mars as a starting point for the story. Imaginatively, and not too good for the American space program, it also suggests a future in which JFK's vision of space travel is carried on under the auspices of Big Business. The spacecraft, Excursion, for instance, features the logos of Pepsi, Sprint and Reebok.

If the rest of the film had proven so inventive, it might have been as good a film as its predecessor. Instead, *Species 2* makes Sil's twin Eve (again Natasha Henstridge) a "good guy," and relies a bit too heavily on quips. "This isn't the fucking *X-Files* for Christ's sake!" quips one character. "Welcome to the maternity ward from Hell," says another.

It's a shame that the film feels the need to be hip, and that some actors feel the need to go big on some occasions, when a sense of grounded reality might have served the production better. Additionally, the movie doesn't really reckon with its subject matter in the way that *Species* did.

By focusing on the character of Patrick Ross, "a perfect hero for imperfect times," as the PR goes, *Species 2* had the real possibility to

look at male sexuality and sexual drives in the 1990s, the way that *Species* did for women in 1995.



Sil's sister, Eve (Natasha Henstridge), smells a male of the species in *Species 2* (1998).

A photograph of Bill Clinton looms large in a senator's office here, and certainly his experience bringing "pain" to his marriage and having inappropriate contact with intern Monica Lewinsky is some of the relevant ground that could have been covered.

Species 2 starts out like it's going to take that route. There's a scene wherein Ross—a morally upstanding astronaut who hopes to be president of the United States one day—feels the urges of his new genetic make-up (as an alien, not a human male) and engages in a threesome with two hot astronaut groupies. The sex scene goes bloodily awry, with the women dying in gory childbirth. But after that, the movie doesn't seem to much want to dwell on male sexuality, or the responsibilities that come with it. Ross just tucks away his progeny in a barn, and after a fit of guilt attempts suicide. His blown-up head grows back and he's back to business.

In the last half-of-the-film, the audience does not connect with Ross at all. He's totally been subverted by his alien programming and no one knows what he is feeling or going through. He's just an unsympathetic monster, and that plays like a lost opportunity, especially since all of America was choosing whether to embrace or reject Clinton, both a successful president and an unfaithful husband

and womanizer.

The great Peter Medak directed this film, and he's the man who gave the world the creepy and underrated *The Changeling* in 1980, not to mention a few episodes of *Space: 1999* (1975–1977). Both of those productions show how capably Medak can, on a good day, establish a sense of mood and pace. But *Species 2* seems jumbled together and all-over-the-place tonally. One minute it's jokey and campy, the next it's gory, and after that it's deadly serious. It just doesn't jell.

Sil and Ross could "fuck the human race into extinction" according to Preston Lennox, and it's a fascinating remark that should have been used to give the film a sharp sense of focus. Sex is a powerful thing, after all. It can consume and obsess the best people, and sex scandals have brought down whole governments. *Species 2* should have been about that, about an upright, moral astronaut seeking the presidency and undercut by a supercharged, alien sex drive. It would have made sense, given the times and given the man in the Oval Office, but *Species 2* is too scattershot to really be about anything substantial.

Sphere * * *

Critical Reception

"There's some stewing tension between Hoffman and Stone (potential members of the Mile Low Club), and an inspired gag in which Hoffman, upon whose report the government based its alien and encounter strategy, confesses he merely ripped off Isaac Asimov and Rod Serling. However, it's a curious indictment when the best moment in a film of this magnitude come from characters sitting around and talking."—Jeff Dawson, *Empire*, 1998, <http://empireonline.com/reviews/ReviewComple.asp?FID-133267>

"... the screenplay by Stephen Hauser and Paul Attanasio piles up mountains of nonsense and then blows them away with a vague, incredible ending that wouldn't hold water in *Peter Pan*. Though *Sphere* begins as a taut thriller, it ends as a big fat goose egg."—Lawrence Toppmann, *The Charlotte Observer*, "Ball of Confusion," February 13, 1998

CAST: Dustin Hoffman (Norman Goodman); Sharon Stone (Beth Halperin); Samuel L. Jackson (Harry); Peter Coyote (Barnes); Queen Latifah (Fletcher); Liev Schreiber (Ted); Marga Gomez (Jane Edmonds); Huey Lewis (Helicopter Pilot); James Pickens, Jr. (USA Official); Bernard Hocke (Seaman).

CREW: Warner Brothers and Baltimore Pictures with Constant Productions in Association with Punch Productions present a Barry Levinson film. *Casting:* Marge Chenoweth. *Costume Designer:* Gloria Gresham. *Music:* Elliott Goldenthal. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* Jeffrey A. Okun. *Film Editor:* Stu Linder. *Production Designer:* Norman Reynolds. *Director of Photography:* Adam Greenberg. *Executive Producer:* Peter Giuliano. *Based on the Novel by:* Michael Crichton. *Produced by:* Michael Crichton, Andrew Wimmer. *Written by:* Stephen Hauser, Paul Attanasio. *Produced and directed by:* Barry Levinson. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 134 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: The United States government discovers what it believes to be an alien spaceship at the bottom of the ocean and sends down a small team of scientists in a makeshift base to investigate. Psychologist Norman Goodman (Hoffman) leads the team, based on a paper he wrote about first contact. The team also consists of brilliant and competitive physicists Harry (Jackson) and Ted (Schreiber) and biologist Beth Halperin (Stone) ... one of Norman's former patients. After a visit to the spaceship, the team determines it is an American spacecraft from the future, and that it is carrying a golden, seemingly impenetrable sphere. After team members individually enter the sphere, strange, nightmarish events begin to occur at the base.

COMMENTARY: At the heart of Barry Levinson's *Sphere*, an adaptation of best-selling author Michael Crichton's 1987 novel, is the understanding that before man can conquer the final frontier, he must tame his own inner frontier: the human mind itself.

Sphere adopts almost the same set-up Crichton utilized to good effect in *The Andromeda Strain* (the book and 1972 film from Robert Wise). A government task force works in a remote location to investigate a global threat (or perceived threat) of extra-terrestrial

origin. In both cases, man's fallibility is exposed, whether it's his dependence on technology in *The Andromeda Strain*, or psychology, as in *Sphere*.

In *Sphere*, an American spacecraft from the future is discovered crashed at the bottom of the ocean. Its cargo is a space orb, a perfect golden pearl of great price, so-to-speak. In the spirit of *Solaris* (1973), this object is perhaps a lifeform itself or perhaps a gift for mankind and can manifest human thoughts. The question of the film: is mankind wise enough to harness it? Can he control his thoughts?

The monster in *Sphere* is thus an updated version of *Forbidden Planet's* Monster from the Id: our human resentments, desires and emotions unloosed as physical terrors (like a pack of attacking squids, for instance, an image drawn from Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, which Samuel L. Jackson's Harry is seen reading).

Another manifestation: a swarm of jellyfish that attack Navy officer Fletcher (Queen Latifah). One entity, named "Jerry," is a mirror reflection of Norman's mind and seems composed entirely of negative emotions like jealousy, arrogance and fear. A clue to Norman's "double identity" as both himself and as the "alien" Jerry is encoded in his very name, his schizophrenia reflecting another cinematic Norman: Norman Bates of *Psycho* (1960).

Interestingly, Norman in the film is also given the name "Goodman," a signifier that he is not, like Bates, a monster, just that humanity at this stage is not able to control its dark side even if, strictly-speaking, "good."

If Norman's split personality reflects *Psycho*, Levinson seems to use Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) as another model in *Sphere*. Like *The Shining*, *Sphere* breaks up its action into distinct sub-sections, using title cards to indicate the audience's entrance into each new chapter of the plot. These title cards include "The Surface," "Analysis" "The Sphere," "The First Exchange," "The Monster" and "Further Analysis" and they seem, in very broad terms, to represent the journey from consciousness ("The Surface") to the roiling jealousies of the subconscious ("The Monster") and the attempt to understand it ("The First Exchange," "Further Analysis").

In *The Shining*, Jack Torrance went inside the vast maze-like spaces of the Overlook Hotel, a haunted place of ghosts. He lost himself, and his sanity, in the process. In *Sphere*, the "human contact team" unwittingly deals with the haunted spaces of the human mind, and Levinson deploys some fragmented jump-cut editing near the film's finale, which seems to affect reality itself, just as the characters' sense of reality has been impacted.

The more that Norman, Harry and Beth desire escape, the more their minds try to catapult them back into the very danger they have created. "Your fears are going to kill all of us," one character asserts, and in short order, reality re-shapes the survivors of the team at the sphere, in the mini-sub, on the spaceship. The human mind, once convinced of a reality, has a hard time letting go.



A government contact team boards a sub for the bottom of the ocean in *Sphere* (1998). From left to right: Dustin Hoffman, Samuel L. Jackson, Peter Coyote, Sharon Stone and Liev Schreiber.

Finally, however, *Sphere* offers a balanced picture of mankind. After all the terror down below, at the bottom of the sea, after all the manifestations of jealousy and violence, Harry, Beth and Norman collectively decide that they can dream better dreams than that. "We have the power to forget," they realize. After the Sphere manifested "the worst of us," these three humans join together in a cathexis and decide to manifest the best of our species: innocence. They send the *Sphere* away so that the military cannot use it as a weapon; so that they themselves will have no memory of what they encountered below the surface, both figuratively (in their minds) and literally (at the bottom of the sea).

Sphere is a good film, with impressive production design and featuring powerful performances from Hoffman, Stone and Jackson. It is not a great film because it tells its story in an exhausted milieu. *Sphere* feels like a re-written *The Andromeda Strain*, in the setting of

James Cameron's *The Abyss* (1989), with touches of the aforementioned *Solaris*, and other films.

That doesn't mean the film has nothing to offer, only that what it offers is enunciated through settings that provoke ennui and disinterest. We've seen this underwater base before; we've experienced thrills involving decompression, objects of alien origin (*Event Horizon*) and already arrived at the conclusion that human psychology is the real villain. For these reasons, the accomplished *Sphere* actually feels much less accomplished than it is. If, on the other hand, you enjoy the high-tech trappings of films such as this, perhaps the creeping sense of familiarity won't bother you.

Some audiences may also feel it is a cop-out that, after all the attacks by sea-life and rattling of the undersea base, there is no monster in *Sphere* but for man's brain. The film seems to promise something spectacular, and then instead offers something internally-driven: a conclusion about man's very nature. In some ways, enjoying *Sphere* is about managing expectations.

One of the most commendable aspects of the film involves that gold pearl, the sphere itself. Norman suggests that it is a lifeform because it chooses what images it will reflect on its curved skin, and which it will not. But the movie never makes that conclusion empirically, and so the sphere, like the monolith in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, remains an object of mystery and awe. Is it a weapon or a gift? A test? Or a being?

Much of the fear arising in *Sphere* is the basic fear of the unknown, of facing something we are not able to understand. Not many horror films of the 1990s went this route. Even the remake of *The Haunting* (1999) turns an ambiguous spiritual haunting into an orgy of shape-shifting furniture and walls. But *Sphere* lets the ambiguity of the Sphere remain, thus spawning a sense of fear in the human contact team and also, for a while, in the movie's audience.

***Subspecies 4: Bloodstorm* * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Ander Hoves (Radu); Denice Duff (Michelle); Jonathan Morris (Ash); Joana Abur (Ana); Mihai Dinvale (Dr. Niculescu);

Floriela Grappini (Serena); Dan Astilean (Dr. Lupu); Ion Haiduc (Lt. Marin); Eugenia Boasnceanu (Caretaker); Cristi Rasuceanu (Mel); Oana Voicu (Rebecca); Gelu Nitu (Detective Voda); Dorina Lazar (Old Woman); Luminita Erga (Nurse); Dan Istrate Boy).

CREW: Full Moon Entertainment presents a Ted Nicolaou film. *Casting:* Robert McDonald Perry Bullington, Catalin Dordea. *Special Visual Effects:* David A. Wagner, John R. Ellis. *Special Make-up Effects:* Mark A. Rappaport. *Production Designer:* Radu Corciova. *Costume Designer:* Oana Paunescu. *Music:* Richard Kosinski, John Zeretzke. *Film Editor:* Gregory Sanders. *Director of Photography:* Adolfo Bartoli. *Executive Producer:* Charles Band. *Produced by:* Vlad Paunescu, Kirk Edward Hansen. *Written and directed by:* Ted Nicolaou. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Rebecca and Mel are killed in an apparent car accident while fleeing Radu's castle, but a passerby named Ana (Abur) takes the vampire Michelle (Duff) to a local hospital. There, a mad doctor who is also a vampire, Dr. Niculescu (Dinvale), attempts to treat her so that she may one day again walk in sunlight. Meanwhile, Radu is resurrected and teams up with two other vampires, Ash (Morris) and Serena (Grappini), unaware that they want him dead. Serena arranges it so that Ana will kill Radu as dawn comes, but Ana is nobody's pawn.

COMMENTARY: One might very well suspect that things did not go well on *Subspecies 4: Bloodstorm* simply from the film's abrupt opening and the abbreviated closing scene. The movie begins with an overturned car, and the fact that two of the franchise's main characters, Mel and Rebecca, have died in an accident. The movie never looks back and the deaths don't play a significant role in the film, unlike, for example, Ripley's reaction to the death of Newt, Hicks and Bishop in *Alien3*. Instead this opening is just a "bump" the movie wants to get over before moving ahead.

Similarly, the movie ends with vampire fledgling and series heroine Michelle (Denice Duff) spirited off in a coffin by Ana and some old lady, and announcing, in hasty voice-over, that she is finally "at peace." It's a tacked-on moment, and one that is mystifying.

In between those two slapdash moments, *Subspecies 4: Bloodstorm* completely loses track of the things that made the previous entries at

least borderline interesting. Namely, Radu's love for Michelle, Michelle's struggle to retain her humanity and ties to the mortal world and Rebecca's relationship with Mel. Instead, the audience is asked to countenance three new characters who are absolutely uninteresting and atrociously performed.

The worst is the vampiric, bug-eyed doctor, played by a performer who seems to think he's in a silent film. He is followed up by the two trendy vampires, Ash and Serena, who stage intrigue against Radu. These are the two most annoying vampires in film history.

And remember, I've seen *Die Hard Dracula*.

So, after the franchise's brief flirtation with competence, we're back to dreck central. That means the film lingers on material we've seen before, like Radu suffering a lingering death. This event was staged with relish in the previous film, with the vampire plunging off the ramparts of his castle on fire, then getting impaled on a tree far below. Here, Radu gets decapitated and it's actually an anti-climax.

When the film isn't repeating itself, it is inconsistent thematically. At one point, Michelle telepathically realizes that her master, Radu, has fallen into a trap, rouses herself from her sickbed in the hospital and teleports immediately to his defense, shouting protectively, "Master! Master!" At the end of the film, however, Ana decapitates Radu right in Michelle's presence and the fledgling doesn't offer a single word of alarm (not even a whispered "master!" this time.)

Then there's the ending, which attempts, post-production, to slap some sense of finality on the franchise. Given the lackluster nature of this fourth entry, I guess I should cheer that voice-over, not deride it. But gosh darn it, after four movies I was just getting into the travails of poor Radu, the sloppiest, most-pathetic vampire in movie history, and this is no way to end his tale.

Someone glue that head back on the guy and make a *Subspecies* 5. And yes, I *am* a glutton for punishment...

Tales of the Mummy * * . (DTV)

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jason Scott Lee (Detective Riley); Louise Lombard (Sam Turkel); Sean Pertwee (Bradley Cortese); Lysette Anthony (Dr. Claire Mulrooney); Michael Lerner (Professor Marcus); Jack Davenport (Detective Bartone); Honor Blackman (Captain Shea); Christopher Lee (Sir Richard Turkel); Shelley Duvall (Edith Butrose); Gerard Butler (Burke); Jon Polito (Parsons); Elizabeth Powers (Macy); Cyril Nri (Forensics); Roger Morrissey (The Mummy); Edward Turdor Oole (Blind Man); Craig Stoult (Nabil); Ann Overstall (Olga); Enzo (Prince Talos); Waris (Princess Nefriama).

CREW: Muraglia/Sladek Productions Presents in association with 7th Voyage/Imperial Entertainment Group and KNB EFX Group, Inc., a Carousel Picture Company Production. *Casting:* Sue Jones, Jeremy Zimmerman. *Music:* Stefano Mainetti. *Production Designer:* Bryce Walmsley. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* William Mesa. *Special Make-up Effects:* Robert Kurtzman, Greg Nicotero, Howard Berger. *Film Editor:* Armin Minasian. *Produced by:* Jeffrey White, Silvio Muraglia, Daniel Sladek. *Executive Producers:* Tom Reeve, Romaine Schroeder. *Story by:* Keith Williams, Russell Mulcahy. *Written by:* John Esposito, Russell Mulcahy. *Directed by:* Russell Mulcahy. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 83 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In August of 1948, the expedition of Sir Richard Turkel (Lee) opens the burial chamber of Prince Talos in Egypt's Valley of the Kings and is met with horrific disaster and gruesome death. In 1999, Turkel's descendant, Sam (Lombard), is part of another scientific expedition to open the burial chamber. After the sealed chamber is breached, the spirit of the malevolent sorcerer Talos escapes to London and begins to steal the organs of the mummy's reincarnated enemies in the hopes of restoring his body during an upcoming planetary alignment. Detective Riley (Lee) investigates a series of murders related to Talos with the help of a psychic, Edith (Duvall), and a man driven insane during the second expedition, Bradley Cortese (Pertwee).

COMMENTARY: Russell Mulcahy directed the stunning cult film, *Highlander* (1986), which set off a long-lived franchise. His 1998 horror film *Tale of the Mummy* bristles with the same brand of narrative and visual ingenuity as Mulcahy's earlier landmark film yet still manages, somehow, to be less than the sum of its often-impressive

parts.

Tale of the Mummy's most ingenious conceit may simply be its unconventional depiction of the rampaging Mummy. Instead of a lumbering, bandaged man, as is the classic interpretation, *Tale of the Mummy* features instead this sort of ambulatory, unwrapped length of bandages. It swirls and coils like a snake, forming and reforming from moment to moment, as if reacting to the dark thoughts of an unseen intelligence.

Occasionally, the Mummy seems to assemble into human-seeming shape, as if gathering all of its resources simultaneously. This interpretation nicely reflects the movie's theme about life, that "death doesn't exist ... it's only a transference of energies."

Rendered in not always interesting CGI, this visualization still manages to capture some sense of formless malevolence and purpose. At the very least, it maintains the villainy of the Mummy, something not necessarily true of Stephen Sommer's *The Mummy* (1999), which was an action film, not a horror film.

Another interesting idea brewing in the film is of evil as a kind of infectious disease or agent. The movie opens in 1948 with an expedition to open the tomb of Talos. It is indeed opened, and the poison air inside literally causes people to fall apart before our eyes, as if their very skin has turned to glass. When another expedition returns in the 1990s to the scene of this terrible accident, it does so with all the latest gear, including biohazard suits and air sensors. Once more, the "curse" of a mummy's tomb has never, at least to my knowledge, been visualized and explained in this fashion, or dealt with under the auspices of such scientific trappings.

The cast, which includes Christopher Lee, Shelley Duvall, Honor Blackman, Michael Lerner, Sean Pertwee and Jason Scott Lee, is also topnotch, so why *Tale of the Mummy* doesn't hold together so well remains a mystery.

Perhaps it's the fatigue of the film's central police procedural format, a story-telling approach thoroughly worn out by the year of this film's release.

Or perhaps the unsatisfactory nature of the film's final CGI shot (echoed, oddly, in 2009's *Paranormal Activity*) leaves one with the artificial aftertaste of inadequate digital visualization, going out of the proceedings.

There's so much good here, including a genuinely surprising twist ending, and at a meager seventy-eight minutes the movie moves rapidly through its appointed paces. The story of a thing that "hasn't

died in 3,000 years" but which now faces modern science should be a slam dunk given the "science gone amok" tenor of the picture and the times it was produced.

But *The Tale of the Mummy* ultimately proves as evasive as those flying bandages rampaging across London. Maybe it's the depiction of the Mummy: it's gloriously original, but somehow we don't identify with it as a personality as powerfully as we might have had the movie depicted the famous movie monster in more familiar terms.

Urban Legend * * *

Critical Reception

"The *Scream* movies succeeded by finding a new way to combine humor and horror, but *Urban Legend* is an unscary, unfunny knock-off. It wants to be *Scream*, but it's more like 'Yelp.'"—Chris Hewitt, *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, September 23, 1998

"It's the kind of movie best seen with an uninhibited crowd willing to shout warnings at the screen and speculate loudly about the identity of the killer almost before the first victim hits the ground. With plenty of red herrings, cliffhanger moments and scream-inducing shocks, *Urban Legend* is as much fun as fright."—Andrew Curry, *The Miami Herald*, September 24, 1998

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jared Leto (Paul); Alicia Witt (Natalie Simon); Rebecca Gayheart (Brenda); Joshua Jackson (Damon); Natasha Wagner (Michelle); Loretta Devine (Reese); Tara Reid (Sasha); Michael Rosenbaum (Parker); Danielle Harris (Tosh); John Neville (Dean Adams); Robert Englund (Professor Wexler); Brad Dourif (Attendant); Julian Richmond (Janitor).

CREW: Phoenix Pictures Presents a Neal H. Moritz, Gina Matthews Production. *Casting:* John Papsidera. *Costume Designer:* Mary

Hamran. *Music*: Christopher Young. *Film Editor*: Jay Cassidy. *Production Designer*: Charles Breen. *Director of Photography*: James Chressanthis. *Executive Producer*: Brad Luffin. *Producer*: Neal Moritz, Gina Matthews. *Written by*: Silvio Horta. *Directed by*: Jamie Blanks. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 99 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: At Pendleton Campus—on the 25th anniversary of a famous dormitory massacre—a serial killer begins murdering students according to the tenets of famous urban legends: the killer in the back seat, the murderous mental patient with a hook, and so forth. Although a professor (England) is initially suspected, a college newspaper reporter, Paul (Leto), and another student, Natalie (Witt), come to realize that the identity of the murderer may have something to do with an urban legend from Natalie's high-school past, one involving reputed gang tactics and the flashing of car headlights. Meanwhile, students are dropping like flies.

COMMENTARY: The secret to crafting an effective slasher film rests in one major component of the paradigm: *the organizing principle*. The organizing principle provides a film with a series of connected leitmotifs so that the exploits of a killer and his victims don't simply feel like unconnected sketches. In other words, the organizing principle is the hook by which a slasher movie hangs together or falls apart.

Fortunately, Jamie Blank's slasher revival entry, *Urban Legend*, features a pretty terrific hook or organizing principle indeed. The film's serial killer is an individual whose life was harmed (the crime in the past or transgression) by an example of urban legend—modern folklore—and so now the killer uses different urban legends to punish those deemed guilty.

In 1981, Jan Harold Brunvand of the University of Utah published his treatise *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meaning*. A decade later, virtually every American understood what an urban legend was. The term had entered the pop culture imagination.

Films as diverse as *Nightmares* (1983), *Candyman* (1992) and *Campfire Tales* trade in urban legend, as do series such as Chris Carter's *Millennium* (1996– 1999). But the 1998 film, *Urban Legend*

actually plays as if screenwriter Silvio Horta took Brunvand's book in hand and adapted many of the most intriguing folk tales to screenplay form. Since slasher movies often rise or fall based on the ingenuity of the murder set pieces, *Urban Legend* works really well in terms of both diversity and visual punch.

The first urban legend featured in the film involves "the killer in the back-seat," a horrortrope already depicted in "The Terror of Ticonderoga" in *Nightmares* (1983), but nonetheless a splendid start for the film, especially since it features Brad Dourif as a crazy-eyed gas station attendant and imperiled ingénue Natasha Wagner playing the Drew Barrymore role, as it were.

Next up is a discussion of "Bloody Mary," an urban legend which was adapted, in part, to *Candyman* and is said to revolve around female fear of sexual activity and the onset of menses. In short order, there's a discussion of "The Killer Upstairs" (featured in the 1979 film *When a Stranger Calls*) and the story about Life cereal commercial star Mikey and Pop Rocks (his stomach exploded when he mixed this candy with carbonated soda).

Other urban legends in the film include the "The Killer with a Hook" lover's lane scenario, a tale that Brunvand believes involves the female teenager's fear of being rushed into sex by an over-eager boyfriend, and the pet in the microwave oven. The transgression from the past involves the Gang High-Beam Initiation legend, a story popularized in the early 1990s. The film's final gambit is the "kidney-heist" legend.



Pendleton student Damon (Joshua Jackson, right) runs into Natalie (Alicia Witt, left) and Brenda (Rebecca Gayheart) in *Urban Legend*.

In addition to re-purposing modern American folklore as slasher movie set-ups, *Urban Legend* complies with slasher-revival form by featuring knowing references and jokes about pop culture. For instance, when Joshua Jackson turns on his car radio, the theme to *Dawson's Creek* is heard briefly. Brad Dourif and Robert Englund play the roles of red-herrings here but are beloved for playing horror movie boogymen Chucky and Freddy, respectively. At one point, a character even states, "If you do go out, make sure you grab your slicker," a knowing reference to the Fisherman in *I Know What You Did Last Summer*.

The point of such references is to forge a connection between aspects of pop culture, between urban legends and horror movies. Their history is interconnected and the movie seems to acknowledge that point. Modern folklore and horror movies both serve the same function in 1990s America, as stories that scare through often subtextual contexts or situations but which nonetheless hold power over the audience.

Like many slasher-revival efforts (including *Scream* and *Scream 2*), *Urban Legend* ends with the cliché of the talking killer, who once unmasked, reveals everything. These scenes almost inevitably take the wind out of a movie's sails, and *Urban Legend* is no exception. The talkie finale doesn't quite live up to the frenetic, fastpaced set-up. All

along, the movie nicely permits audiences to recognize urban legends without too much explanation or exposition, and then the talking killer appears and chats away.

It makes you miss Michael Myers and Jason, really. They had the good manners not to talk too much. But again, the slasher revival is a modification, not simply a regurgitation, of the original slasher paradigm. The revival efforts tread more heavily into the morality of given situations, with protagonists enmeshed in questionable behavior and paying the price.

Here, for instance, the protagonist was involved in a car accident that killed the slasher's loved one. This requires explanation indeed, in a way that Jason and Michael's kills do not, but the talking killer almost always slows down momentum in the third act of these movies.

Like *Scream*, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and other slasher revivals, *Urban Legend* does involve, to a large extent, questions of morality and accountability. Natalie has a criminal record for "reckless endangerment," and that's the key to the mystery. Beyond that, however, Paul had to drop out of his journalism ethics course ... it was pulling down his GPA, another indicator that teens in the 1990s are smart, sassy and somehow lacking in the core principles of morality.

A decent example of the slasher revival, *Urban Legend* impresses with its knowledge of urban legends, but it's also a fast-paced, fun, and scary movie.

***Wes Craven Presents Carnival of Souls* * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bobbie Phillips (Alex Grant); Larry Miller (Louis Seagram); Cleavant Derricks (Sid); Paul Johansson (Michael); Anna Kristin McKowen (Elaine); Henry G. Sanders (Officer Soby); Raquel Beaudene (Young Alex); Robert A. Lasardo (Candyman); Shawnee Smith (Sandra Grant); Mark Paskell (Clown).

CREW: Trimark Pictures Presents a Michael Meltzer Production. *Casting:* Betsy Fels. *Line Producer:* Lansing Parker. *Music:* Andrew Rose. *Costume Designer:* Michele Michel. *Production Designer:* Aaron Osborne. *Film Editor:* David Handman. *Director of Photography:* Christopher Buffa. *Co-Producer:* Phillip B. Goldfine. *Co-Executive Producer:* Anthony

Hickox. *Executive Producers:* Wes Craven Mark Amin. *Produced by:* Michael Meltzer, Lisa Harrison, Peter Soby, Jr. *Written for the screen and directed by:* Adam Grossman. NR. *Running time:* 86 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On the anniversary of her mother's murder, Alex (Phillips) is confronted by her angry killer, the child-molesting circus clown, Louis Seagram (Miller). She drives her car (with Louis inside) off a dock into a harbor rather than let the maniac attack her little sister, Sandra (Smith). Afterwards, Alex begins to see demons and the evil Louis everywhere, and even experiences strange jumps in time and place.

COMMENTARY: The original *Carnival of Souls* (1962) was a one-of-a-kind cinematic experience.

Forged on a tiny budget in the middle of nowhere Kansas, the film was undeniably crude. Yet the film by Herk Harvey was surreal and creepy too—a mesmerizing, unsettling journey into a disturbing, black-and-white netherworld. Performances in the original *Carnival of Souls* are truly variable, from the exquisite and sublime (the entrancing Hilligoss) to the amateurish (there's a moment when a stranger by a water fountain addresses the camera directly), but there's an intriguing alchemy at work in *Carnival of Souls*, one impossible to dismiss.

The film's production deficits somehow manage to play into the overriding sense of the unreal and dream-like. There are no zombie attacks, no fierce action sequences or bouts of blood-letting. Instead, the venture methodically and memorably (and with unforgettable imagery) charts one woman's tragic plight as she slips slowly from the world of the living to the world of the dead. In that half-detected twilight between life and death, she begins to regret that she never embraced life as meaningfully as she should have. Because now, death's cold embrace—a dance partner in the carnival of souls—is all she can look forward to.

The 1960s *Carnival of Souls* had budgetary drawbacks but viewers could easily overlook them because the film nonetheless expressed something powerful and resonant about mortality. That abandoned Saltair Carnival was a realm of pure terror and our heroine was never going to escape it, no matter how hard she tried.

Ultimately, we're all going to have our dance card punched by Death too, and thus something rings true about the stark, mysterious film and the hopeless, inevitable air that dominates it.

The same could not be said for this dreadful 1998 remake. It stars Bobbie Phillips as Alex Grant, a young woman who witnessed the murder of her mother twenty years ago by an abusive clown, Louis Seagram (Larry Miller). On the anniversary of her mom's murder, Alex is accosted by Louis once more, and she drives her car into the waters of a California harbor rather than let the sadist endanger her younger sister, Sandra (Shawnee Smith). Following the accident in the harbor, Alex begins to move throughout different stages of her life, is terrorized by Louis repeatedly, and even sees gesticulating, spasming demons straight out of *Jacob's Ladder* (1990).

Technically-speaking, *Wes Craven Presents Carnival of Souls* is a much less accomplished effort than the original film, an odd fact given that the remake undoubtedly cost far more than Herk Harvey's groundbreaking original.

This 1998 film is staged so ineptly that sometimes reverse angles don't even match up. And the characters here are so often shot in close-up and medium-shot that you can't tell for certain where characters are positioned in relationship to each other from moment to moment. One scene that features the evil Louis popping up in the back seat of Alex's car is so badly composed and so poorly edited that you aren't even sure that Miller and Phillips were in the same car at the same time to shoot the scene. Additionally, the movie is over-lit and blandly shot in a style that makes your average Sci-Fi Original Movies look like Fellini.

The new *Carnival of Souls* also boasts all the tell-tale marks of bad 1990s screen writing. In the original film, we met a character who happened to be in a car wreck, but the audience knew little about her background. As the movie went on, we learned she was a cold fish and that she had held a job as a church organist. But we came to sympathize with the character through the strange events occurring all around her. We identified with her because something strange and terrible was happening to her and because, we felt, it could happen to us too.

By contrast, the 1998 film layers on facile psychology and off-the-shelf, thoroughly unnecessary character flourishes. Alex is a "psychologically damaged" person with "a tragic past" she must overcome. The events of the film take place on the anniversary of her mother's murder ... the event she could never get past. How many times have we seen that kind of predictable set-up before? It's one of

Hollywood's most over-used clichés.

The Boogeyman of *Carnival of Souls* this time around has changed too, and not for the better. He is not some wide-eyed, pale-faced personification of Death, but rather Alex's "personal" demon: the groping, gruesome and utterly obvious Louis. The focus on the inner life—on mortality itself—has been turned outward to the simple defeat of a two-dimensional "bad guy" the audience can hiss at.

The 1998 film is also slathered with dopey New Age, touchy-feely dialogue about death. Alex shares a discussion with a man who just might be an angel. He tells her, "It's time to let go." She replies, "I can't. I haven't lived yet." At another point, during a discussion of closing down her bar (The Mermaid Bar), Alex tells her sister, "I'm not ready to go." Sandra replies, "I know, but you're closer than you think." Welcome to Foreshadowing 101.

But once more, the whole concept of the original film is undercut because death is now a safe harbor, a peaceful zone ... not a realm of the unknown and the terrifying. This change has occurred so that the film can end with a kind of happy ending: our heroine has beaten the bad guy, "achieved" the rescue of her sister, and moved on to a "good place," but again, it's terribly clichéd.

There's also a gratuitous sex scene on a boat that pops up with bizarre urgency, but then leads nowhere and is never commented upon. Suddenly, Alex has mad, passionate, clutching sex with the angel figure. A minute later he's gone, never seen or referred to again. Even more bizarrely, the movie constantly skips time frames—back and forth between scenes—thus totally negating even the most rudimentary sense of narrative momentum and precluding the need for that pesky thing called "continuity."

Rather ungraciously, *Wes Craven Presents Carnival of Souls* even fails to credit the original 1962 film as a source of inspiration. There's no "based on" opening credit here, despite the fact that the overall outline of the film is the same as the original (a woman dies and doesn't know it) and despite the fact that certain shots are explicitly re-staged (the car pulled from the water).

The IMDb lists John Clifford, the writer of the original *Carnival of Souls*, in the credits for this film, but his name is nowhere on the front of the film. The opening credit reads: written for the screen and directed by Adam Grossman.

Bottom line: *Wes Craven Presents Carnival of Souls* is a bad remake and an arrogant one too. It has the audacity to adopt the title of a beloved older film but then substitutes weak ideas for the powerful ones of the original. A remake of *Carnival of Souls* need not have been

slavishly imitative of the original, but it could have captured at least some of the ambiguity, some of the terror, some of the spikiness, of the one-of-a-kind 1962 effort.

This remake fails on all fronts. I'm a big admirer of Wes Craven, but I sure as hell wish his name didn't appear before the title of this travesty, the lousiest of horror remakes and perhaps the worst horror film of the decade.

***Wicked* * *¹/₂**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Julia Stiles (Ellie Christensen); William R. Moses (Ben Christensen); Linda Hart (Mrs. Potter); Michael Parks (Detective Boland); Vanessa Zima (Inge Christianson); Louise Myrback (Lena Anderson); Sterling Macer (Detective Ritchie); Chelsea Field (Karen Christensen); Patrick Muldoon (Lawson Smith); Patrick Mc-Tavish (Bobby Smith).

CREW: Automatic Pictures Presents a Frank Beddon Production, a Michael Steinberg film. *Casting:* Johanna Ray, Elaine J. Huzzar. *Costume Designer:* Sara Jane Slotnick. *Line Producer:* Jaime Beardsley. *Music:* Cliff Martinez. *Film Editor:* Daniel Gross. *Production Designer:* Dominic Watkins. *Director of Photography:* Bernd Heintz. *Written by:* Eric Weiss. *Produced by:* Frank Beddon. *Directed by:* Michael Steinberg. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 85 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In their affluent, gated community, the Christensen family is struck by tragedy. Mom, Karen (Fields), is murdered on the very day that she argued with her teenage daughter, Ellie (Stiles). After her mother's death, Ellie begins inappropriately to act as the family matriarch, right down to seducing her grieving father, Ben (Moses). The police investigate the murder and the suspects include a next-door neighbor, Lawson (Muldoon), who was having an affair with Karen, and Ben himself. Ellie's young sister, Inge (Zima), discovers the truth for herself.

COMMENTARY: A strange and disturbing trend began in the late 1990s and continued right through the next decade. In fact, it shows no signs of abating even in 2011. Simply put, American girls are growing up too fast. Diane Levin, Ph.D. and co-author of *So Sexy So Soon*, traces the problem back to the mid-1980s, when children's television was deregulated, "allowing TV shows to market products to kids."⁷⁴

The result was that, at a younger age than ever before, American girls were becoming viewed as sexual objects and even dressed up to be sexual objects. This explains, to a great degree, the response to the murder of six-year-old beauty pageant JonBenét Ramsey in 1996. Many Americans blamed the parents in that case, but what they were really reacting negatively to were the images of the pre-pubescent beauty contestant dolled up in lipstick and heavy make-up, made to look creepily sexy.

In 1998, a new teen idol also became a role model for girls, Britney Spears. Her appeal, simply put, was school-girl sexiness. In videos for songs like "Baby One More Time" and "Oops I Did It Again," Spears dressed and acted in an extremely sexualized fashion, and suddenly moms and dads had something else to worry about regarding their children and media influences.

Wicked is a 1998 horror film starring Julia Stiles that picks up on this unsettling trend in 1990s culture. It concerns an American teenage girl who grows up way too fast and is unable to relate to men, even her Dad, in anything but a sexualized fashion. When Ellie's mother is murdered, Ellie steps up to replace her in the family unit. Boundaries become blurred as Ellie begins wearing her mother's clothes, preparing dinner for Dad, and smoking cigarettes. In one nightmarish instance, Ellie even has sexual intercourse with her father.

In addition to all this, Ellie may be a serial killer. One thing is for certain, she plans to murder her Dad's girlfriend, Lena (Myrbeck). When Ellie contemplates this act, the film visualizes the teen's tunnel vision and sense of laser focus. The frame is reduced entirely to black, save for Lena in a spotlight—a bulls eye. She's the target.

Wicked also features aspects of the police procedural. But the film's heart is with the hearth, with the family itself. After Ellie is herself killed, the cycle of violence continues with her younger sister, who has learned by example what it means to be the alpha woman in this family.

Julia Stiles is impressive in *Wicked* and the movie is fascinating

from a certain unsavory perspective. The film's primary weakness is that it seems to let Dad off the hook for his egregiously bad behavior. Some might see this development as a comment on President Clinton having inappropriate relations with Monica Lewinsky and ultimately getting a pass from the American people, but Lewinsky was not Clinton's biological daughter. Incest is a whole different level of ugliness. But what *Wicked* seems to suggest is that it's the girl's fault for behaving badly, and well, a guy is just a guy. Even if that guy is Dad.

That's a pretty reprehensible message to send, even if *Wicked* is spot-on about girls in America growing up too fast in the 1990s.

The Wisdom of Crocodiles (a.k.a. Immortality) * * *

*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jude Law (Steven Grlszcz); Elina Lowensohn (Anne); Timothy Spall (Detective Healey); Kerry Fox (Maria Vaughan); Jack Davenport (Sgt. Roche); Colin Salmon (Martin); Nick Lamont (Toll Bridge Attendant); Hitler Wond (Noodles Chan); Anastasia Hiller (Karen); Rupert Farley (Priest); Diane Howse (Mrs. Healey).

CREW: Miramax Films, MGM, Goldwyn Films International, Film Foundry Partners Entertainment Film Distributors, Zenith Productions in association with Arts Council of England present a Zenith Film.

Director of Photography: Oliver Curtis. *Film Editor:* Robin Sales.

Production Designer: Andy Harris. *Original Music:* John Lunn, Orlando Gough. *Costume Designer:* Anna Sheppard. *Line Producer:* Laura Jillian. *Executive Producers:* Scott Meek, Nigel Stafford-Clark. *Written by:* Paul Hoffman. *Produced by:* David Lascelles, Carolyn Choa. *Directed by:* Po Chih Leong. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 98 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A handsome, sick man, Steven Grlszcz (Law), stalks and feeds on suicidal, empty women. He only feeds on them, vampirically, after he has made them fall in love with him, primarily because he believes that their blood carries the emotion of love and that this emotion nourishes him. The police, led by Catholic Detective Healey

(Spall), are able to connect Grłszcz to a corpse they found dumped in a nearby body of water. At the same time, Grłszcz romances a beautiful, vivacious woman, Anne (Lowensohn), believing that she can cure his sickness.

COMMENTARY: The lead character and vampire of *The Wisdom of Crocodiles*, Steven Grłszcz (Jude Law), has no vowels in his last name. This fact is a signifier that he lacks something human, something soft. He seems to know it himself, too. He tells one of his girlfriends that humans don't have one brain, they have three: a human brain built over a mammal brain built over a reptile brain.

But something is wrong with Steven. He's not fully human and perhaps has only that crocodile brain and none of the surrounding ones. He lives to cause women pain ... to make them love him, but this is only so he can devour them. Steven rescues one of his victims from a suicide attempt for the sole reason of winning her confidence ... then abusing it. During foreplay with her, he snaps her neck and drinks her blood.



Steven (Jude Law) embraces Anne (Elina Lowensohn) his next victim, in the unconventional vampire film, *The Wisdom of Crocodiles* (1998).

You can't exactly say that Steven has remorse about his murderous activities, but he has lived long enough to understand that sooner or later they must end, and that, when they do, it will come as something of a relief. The film opens with Steven's voice-over narration relating an incident from his childhood, a terrible dread of falling. As a boy, he had been hanging from a tree branch, and knew, eventually, he had to fall.

That's a metaphor for his ending too, a span that the totality of *The Wisdom of Crocodiles* depicts with a dearth of dialogue but a plethora of ambiguity and intrigue. At one point, Steven discusses "the agony of holding on and the wonderful feeling of letting go." That's the wisdom of the crocodile, an acknowledgement of its own monstrosity and the thought that in ending comes peace.

The nineties tried to re-tool vampires and to find new meaning in them. From the Byronic anti-heroes of *Interview with a Vampire* (1994) to the love-struck Count in *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, Hollywood had an overwhelming need to re-contextualize the immortal creatures. They were played for laughs (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), pathos (*To Sleep with a Vampire*) and intellectual curiosity (*The Addiction*). This film eschews virtually all the trappings of the vampire myth, so Steve can walk in daylight, does not sport fangs, and boasts no aversion to religious iconography.

Instead, vampirism is treated as simply a disease of the blood. Steven has a sick heart, literally, and the blood of his lovelorn victims makes him feel more human and less ... crocodile. "Love is what I feel. What I eat," he states. It's as though he must spawn in his victims the strongest feelings of love, devotion, and loss in the species so that he can feel something, *anything* remotely human. And you get the feeling that he wants to be human.

When Anne attempts to save her own life by rejecting Steven, by telling him that she doesn't love him and therefore won't make a very good feast, Steven replies that he "may not be in her heart" but that he's still in "her blood." And it's also interesting the way he tries to manipulate her into "feeding" him. He claims he can't kill her and it's either a sudden and unprecedented outbreak of human empathy or a clever trick. He even cries crocodile tears when he tells her that his body is breaking down. Quite smartly, Anne doesn't buy into any of it.

There's a police procedural angle too, as there are to so many horror films of the 1990s, and delightfully, it's played well here. A kindly detective named Healey, portrayed by Timothy Spall, at first suspects Steven of all the crimes he has, in fact, committed. But when he learns on his own that Steven saved a young woman during a

suicide attempt, he softens. You feel sorry for Healey because he comes to think of Steven as a friend, when in fact he is just being manipulated by the reptilian vampire.

The Wisdom of Crocodiles is not a big, spectacular horror movie, but it is a great character piece, and a great variation on the vampire mythos. Jude Law projects a cool, icy persona here. He is so attractive and yet so remote and these are the very qualities that draw women to Steve. "I like a man with a bit of mystery about him," Anne says, and she lives to regret those words.

She's actually dating a dinosaur, one who never became extinct and who passes perfectly for human.

***The X-Files: Fight the Future* * * *^{1/2}**

Critical Reception

"Like the TV show *The X-Files* movie is a paradox—a geek thing that's also cool. Not just because it's noirish. Or because it's about alien conspiracies. The cool of *The X-Files* comes from its confidence—maybe because its creator, Chris Carter, is a surf jock, not some pasty dork who's read too many comic books. The movie announces this supreme confidence early on in a wry moment of understated swagger. FBI Special Agent Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) has just found out that his partner, Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson), wants to quit the Bureau. Discredited and depressed, Mulder is getting drunk in a bar. Finding the men's room out of order, he relieves himself in the alley, onto a movie poster. The movie is *Independence Day*."—*Newsweek*, "Decoding the X-Files," June 22, 1998, Volume 131, Issue 25, page 70

"The film is lumbering and ungainly—its plot, though ingenious and elaborate, never really makes much sense on a scene-to-scene level, and very little seems to actually happen in the film (the aliens themselves are barely glimpsed). Its makers seem content simply to disseminate, to add some new years of paranoia and dread to their hokey mythos...."— Jake Horsley,

"... one rhythmless, unmagical stunt after another, practically no narrative coherence, *Alien*- type monsters, wisecracks instead of literate dialogue, and— worst of all—a soundtrack that pulverizes the audience with sheer volume instead of making its collective skin crawl. Only the opening sequence, involving an attempt to locate a bomb in a federal building has any real zip to it. The rest is noise."—Richard Allen, *Commonweal*, "Two Kinds of Paranoia," August 14, 1998, Volume 125, issue 14, page 20

"... another episode of the TV series, and not a very good one."—Doug Pratt, *Doug Pratt's DVD*, 2001, page 1361

Cast and Crew

CAST: David Duchovny (Agent Fox Mulder); Gillian Anderson (Agent Dana Scully); Mitch Pileggi (A.D. Skinner); Terry O'Quinn (Agent Darius Michaud); John Neville (The Well-Manicured Man); William B. Davis (The Cigarette Smoking Man); Martin Landau (Alvin Kurtzweil); Jeffrey DeMunn (Dr. Ben Bronschweig); Blythe Danner (Jana Cassidy); Armin Mueller Stahl (Conrad Strughold); Lucas Black (Stevie); Chris Fennell (Boy #2); Cody Newton (Boy #3); Blake Stokes (Boy #4); Dean Haglund (Langly); Bruce Harwood (John Fitzgerald Byers); Tom Braidwood (Melvin Frohike); Don S. Williams (First Elder); George Murdock (Second Elder); Michael Wiles (Black-Haired Man); Jason Beghe (FBI Agent); Glenne Headly (Bartender).

CREW: 20th Century–Fox and Ten Thirteen Productions presents a Chris Carter Production, a Rob Bowman Film. *Casting:* Liberman/Hirschfeld. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* Mat Beck. *Special Makeup Effects:* Alec Gillis, Tom Wright. *Co-Producer:* Frank Spotnitz. *Costume Designer:* Marlene Stewart. *Music:* Mark Snow. *Film Editor:* Stephen Mark. *Production Designer:* Christopher Nowak. *Director of Photography:* Ward Russell. *Executive Producer:* Lata Ryan. *Produced by:* Chris Carter, Daniel Sackheim. *Story by:* Chris Carter and Frank Spotnitz. *Written by:*

Chris Carter. *Directed by:* Rob Bowman. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 121 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: F.B.I. Agents Mulder (Duchovny) and Scully (Anderson) fail to stop an apparent terrorist bombing of the Federal Building in Texas and are censured by the F.B.I. To clear their names, the former X-Files partners begin their own investigation, using information from conspiracy theorist Alvin Kurtzweil (Landau). When Mulder and Scully learn too much about a global conspiracy working with an extra-terrestrial race, the enigmatic Cigarette Smoking Man (Davis) sees to it that Scully is infected with an alien disease and sent to a top secret facility in Antarctica. Desperate, Mulder follows her, but not before a de-briefing from the Well-Manicured Man, who tells him (almost) everything he needs to know about the aliens, their intentions on Earth, and the conspiracy.

COMMENTARY: The greatest horror franchise of the 1990s transitions gracefully to the silver screen in *The X-Files: Fight the Future*, a tense, ambitious effort that traces the shape of a powerful international conspiracy yet ultimately re-asserts the primacy of the individual—the belief that one man can fight city hall ... if he (or she) commits to the truth, wherever it shall lead.

Like many conspiracy theories, *The X-Files* movie commences with an act of terror, in this case by featuring visuals that hark back to the 1995 bombing of the Alfred Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Here, it is a Federal building in Dallas (the original city of conspiracy, since at least 1963).

F.B.I. agents Mulder (Duchovny) and Scully(Anderson) become scapegoats for the act of terror (think Olympic Park's Richard Jewell) and attempt to clear their names. What they soon unlock is a conspiracy within the government and the fact that the World War II generation which defeated the Nazis has in turn sold out the planet Earth to aliens and their impending plans for colonization.

Picking up on a number of 1990s conspiracy theories, *The X-Files: Fight the Future* suggests that FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Act) is the very thing that will allow the White House to suspend the Constitution when the alien emergency— a plague—begins. Of course, no less a source than Pat Robertson suggested that activating FEMA

and ordering martial law was Bill Clinton's secret plan to stay in the White House beyond the end of his second term when the disaster of Y2K arrived.

Given this theme, *The X-Files* is a film about the surface (lies) and the truth (the buried underneath). From the film's first passage, a battle between heroic cavemen and alien creatures in a subterranean cave in 37,000 B.C., the movie suggests how surfaces hide dark secrets. A boy falls underground in the very spot of that battle in 1998 and uncovers the alien's true lifeform, black oil.

Later, Mulder finds an alien-built installation beneath the placid white surface of Antarctica. The astro-turf and childrens' playground in Dallas hide what was once a laboratory of the Syndicate, the Conspiracy.



Producer Chris Carter took his TV series *The XFiles* to the movies in 1998's *The X-Files: Fight the Future*.

The outer world and the underworld are even of importance in terms of our human bodies. The alien virus changes our physiology. On the outside: human beings. On the inside: gestating, growing aliens, just ready to burst out. What brings the change? Heat. Just as the "heat" of Mulder and Scully's investigation brings to light of so many aspects of the global conspiracy.

It's never easy to adapt a TV series to film, and *The X-Files*, because it features a story arc with a beginning and middle, was probably even more difficult than most. However, *The X-Files: Fight the Future* does a remarkable job of introducing audiences to this world, the conspiracy, and this particular tale. The film never gets bogged down in confusing details, nor does it shun the delightful complexity

of the TV series that spawned it. At the heart of *The X-Files* are two personalities: Scully and Mulder. Scully is a medical doctor and a skeptic; Mulder is a psychologist and a believer.

Virtually every case they ever solved on the series involved how they reconciled these two views, how they saw the world through their individual "lens." The movie is much the same in approach, but with a new, underlying truth too. Here, Scully and Mulder actually get to a truth not found yet in the TV program: that the original lifeform on Earth was the virus, the black oil, and that the Conspiracy is trying to preserve itself, that "survival is the ultimate ideology."

In the movie, Scully and Mulder also see more of the architecture and technology of both the aliens and their sympathizers on Earth. Not every question is answered, but watching the movie one is satisfied that the heroes have bested some of their opponents, including The Cigarette-Smoking Man. In vetting this aspect, the movie suggests that an engaged, committed individual can stop the evil of a conspiracy, and that's a positive message not always stated in conspiracy films. Conspiracy tends to hinge on negativism and the belief that the individual doesn't matter, but Chris Carters' film (and TV series) is a notable exception. It's fascinating to see how this message is encoded within the film.

The first scene takes place thousands of years ago, in cave-men times and depicts two "partners," the prehistoric antecedents of Scully and Mulder, searching for the truth and working together. Their hunt ultimately goes badly, but the point is that even in pre-history, there were forces to combat power, individuals putting their life on the line to stop the forces of evil. This is what makes *The X-Files* a positive influence, culturally, and not merely a doom and gloom wallow into conspiracy theories and monsters. On the side of the light are two warriors of virtue, Dana and Fox.

The X-Files: Fight the Future is bigger and more elaborate than any episode of the series that preceded it. For the first time, the audience actually sees the "gray" aliens, and they are monstrous, savage, clawed things. For the first time, the audience also sees the scientific installations of the Syndicate, particularly a domed outcropping in the middle of a cornfield, which makes the Midwest look like the surface of an alien world.

For the first time, we see our beloved characters in "big budget" disaster scenarios, like fleeing a collapsing ice cliff in Antarctica (an awe-inspiring visual) or escaping from an exploding building. Yet the increased scope of the production does not hinder what matters most in this franchise: the characters' journey to discovery. Rather, the

feature-film approach merely makes the secrets Scully and Mulder expose all the more startling and scary.

Even more delightfully, *The X-Files: Fight the Future* dramatizes a complete story, even though there is still, as yet, much unknown about the Conspiracy and the aliens. "Of the whole," our heroes have seen "but pieces" and that means that *The X-Files* movie accomplishes not just the goal of picking up the threads of the TV series, but, ultimately, handing them back to the continuing series too. It's a seamless tradition, and a remarkable feature film debut for the franchise.

1999

April 20:

In Littleton, Colorado, two boys—Eric Klebold and Dylan Harris—launch the deadliest high school shooting in American history at Columbine High. They kill twelve people before turning the guns on themselves. The media blames violent video games, horror movies and Marilyn Manson.

May 19:

Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace opens theatrically and becomes the highest grossing Star Wars film.

June 1:

Music download service Napster debuts.

June 19:

Horror author and legend Stephen King is struck by a car near his home in Maine and badly injured.

July 16:

John F. Kennedy, Jr., and wife Carolyn Bessette die in a plane crash off Martha's Vineyard.

October 10:

The world's human population reaches six billion.

December 31:

The Astronaut's Wife * * *

Critical Reception

"The film has strong echoes of *Rosemary's Baby*, with dashes of *The Right Stuff* and *Alien* thrown in. Writer-director Rand Ravich's feature debut is the tale of an apple-pie hero inhabited by a nasty alien intelligence, and dragging his wife down with him. It does move along briskly, making up for melodrama with some guttwisting flourishes. But the film is often silly and ultimately forgettable. *Rosemary's Baby* was terrifying because the supernatural evil at its centre was so like the corruption in everyday life. The malevolence in *The Astronaut's Wife* seems concocted—a mere plot device."—Patricia Hluchy, *Maclean's*, "The Wrong Stuff," August 30, 1999, page 45

"Ravich lays on the symbolism thick and heavy: The camera views Jillian from above as she stares at the result of her pregnancy test; during a party for Spencer and Alex, the camera pans back from the building's glass ceiling, which from above is a dead ringer for an *Independence Day* spaceship; the film is awash with references to dual identities and insensitive husbands. And then there's the deeper interpretation—brought to bear in a heavy-handed scene featuring a support group for expectant mothers—that all women feel alienated from their husbands during pregnancy.... For summer movie fare, however, these are niggling complaints. *The Astronaut's Wife* might not soar, but it delivers a decent payload."—Al Brumley, *Dallas Morning News*, September 2, 1999

Cast and Crew

CAST: Johnny Depp (Spencer Armacost); Charlize Theron (Jillian Armacost); Clea Duvall (Nan); Joe Morton (Sherman Reese); Donna Murphy (Natalie); Blair Brown (Shelly McLaren); Nick Cassavettes

(Alex Steck); Samantha Eggar (Doctor); Tom Noonan (Jackson McLaren); Tom O'Brien (Allen Dodge); Lucy Lin (Shelly Carter); Charles Lanyer (Spencer's Doctor); Michael Crider (Pat Elliot).

CREW: New Line Cinema Presents a Rand Ravich Film, a Mad Chance Production. *Executive Producers:* Mark Johnson, Brian Witten, Donna Langley. *Director of Photography:* Allen Daiau. *Production Designer:* Jan Roelfs. *Film Editors:* Steve Mirkovich, Tim Alverson. *Music:* George S. Clinton. *Costume Designer:* Isis Mussenden. *Casting:* Rick Pagano, Debi Manwiller. *Produced by:* Andrew Lazar. *Written and directed by:* Rand Ravich.

SYNOPSIS: An explosion in space nearly takes the life of hero astronaut Spencer Armacost (Depp), much to the dismay of his high school teacher wife, Jillian (Theron). After a period of recovery, Spencer quits NASA and goes to work in New York City for a private aircraft company developing a new attack plane ... a bewildering move to Jillian. After a time, Jillian begins to suspect that the man who returned to her from space is not the man she married, and her feelings are augmented by the evidence of former NASA scientist Sherman Reese (Morton). He shows her evidence that Spencer's mind may have been erased and then rewritten by an alien radio signal. When Jillian learns she is pregnant with twins, she wonders about the true nature of her babies.

COMMENTARY: Charlize Theron just can't have a happy marriage in New York City. In *The Devil's Advocate*, she played the apartment-bound, depressed wife of a lawyer whose very soul was on the line. In *The Astronaut's Wife*, Theron plays the apartment-bound, depressed wife of an astronaut who has become possessed by an alien life form. In both films, she is quite convincing in the role of the one left behind, and actually, both films are pretty good.

As many critics noted, *The Astronaut's Wife* is a clever modification of the Roman Polanski film *Rosemary's Baby* (1968). There, a woman became impregnated by the Devil and was to give birth to the Anti-Christ, apparently to bring ruin upon the human race. Rosemary Woodhouse's husband was actually a betrayer, a man who traded his wife to the Devil for a successful career in Hollywood.

Alone and kicking around in her apartment, Rosemary wasn't

sure if something terrible was happening with her baby, or if she was simply losing her mind. Rosemary's only real friend, Hutch (Maurice Evans), is "intercepted," shall we say, by the forces of evil before he can help Rosemary, and falls into a coma.

Similarly, in *The Astronaut's Wife*, a woman named Jillian is impregnated by an alien entity possessing her husband and is destined to give birth to alien twins who will apparently rain doomsday upon the human race.

Here, Spencer is the alien, not a betrayer, though once an alien, he experiences a lucrative business career in Manhattan. Alone and kicking around her apartment, Jillian is uncertain if something terrible has happened in her marriage or if she is simply losing her mind. As the movie takes pains to point out, she has suffered bouts of depression before, and even been suicidal. The only other person who knows what is happening to Spencer is Reese (Joe Morton), and he is "intercepted" and done away with by Spencer before the truth can become widely known.

And, as is immediately apparent, Rosemary Woodhouse and Jillian Armacost share an identical hairstyle.

In spite of, or perhaps because of these similarities to a classic of the horror cinema, *The Astronaut's Wife* works as a paranoid and scary film. The film features some menacing shots that suggest a malevolent alien intelligence is watching everything ... waiting.

At a party, for instance, one of Spencer's fellow astronauts collapses. Suddenly, the camera retracts—up, up and away—from the party site, to a position in high orbit, overhead. It's an extreme high angle which paints the people of Earth as nothing more important than ants. And it simultaneously suggests that the eyes of non-humans are upon us.

Rand Ravich has also mastered the art of the unsettling close-up here. Much of *The Astronaut's Wife* is a psychological battle between husband and wife, and Ravich regularly deploys unflinching close-ups, in particular of Depp, for signs of feeling, signs of weakness, signs of humanity. He also uses shots of hands to contrast human and alien physicality. At one point, there's a view of Spencer's steady, unflinching hand as he feels Jillian's pulse (as if to experience what life really is), and later, that shot is echoed with Reese, whose hands shake as he reveals the information exposing Spencer.



Jillian (Charlize Theron) feels alienated from her astronaut husband, Spencer (Johnny Depp) in *The Astronaut's Wife* (1999).

Under the surface of *Rosemary's Baby* was a story about hysteria and loneliness, an ambiguous tale of a woman, left alone by her husband at a vulnerable time, during pregnancy, in what she felt was a vulnerable place (her new home). *The Astronaut's Wife* literally concerns "alienation," of a husband and wife who find they can no longer talk to each other or no longer trust each other.

Spencer is ruthless in playing Jillian's emotions. "Can you try just for once to be happy?" he pleads with her, when she questions him about his two missing minutes in space (the missing minutes during which an alien life force "wiped" his mind and replaced it with an alien consciousness). Having struggled with depression, this is an important question for Jillian, and it makes her second-guess herself. Is she mentally ill, or is something malevolent happening?

After a while, in *The Astronaut's Wife* (as was also the case with Theron's character in *The Devil's Advocate*), you really come to sympathize with Jillian. Everything that Spencer tells her is rational, reasonable and reassuring, yet we know he is a monster, a wolf in sheep's clothing. What this movie really concerns is the marital fear that you don't know your spouse anymore, that something is being hidden from you in the most important relationship of your life.

With fine performances from Theron, Depp and Morton, *The Astronaut's Wife* is very nearly a great horror movie, one ultimately let down only by a disappointing climax in which evil wins out (again like *Rosemary's Baby*) and Jillian's mind is wiped and possessed by

aliens. The final coda, with Jillian and a new husband raising creepy Aryan babies, is chilling but not satisfying. The particulars of the alien plan are not described, and so it plays out as just a gimmick. The audience has come too closely to identify with Jillian to see her lose quite so thoroughly to an amorphous, non-corporeal alien entity.

***Bats* ***

Critical Reception

"They don't make 'em a lot worse than *Bats*, a dimwitted, fill-in-the-blanks horror opus that slanders a fine and useful mammal. Not since the dreaded *Night of the Lepus* (1972) with its murderous 150-pound rabbits, has an innocent creature been so royally trashed by moviemakers."—Walter Addiego, *The San Francisco Examiner*, "Horror of *Bats* Is That It Was Made," October 22, 1999, page 1

"The overall style is reminiscent of the many horror videos that used to lurk in your local rental stores during the 80s. *Tremors* this isn't, but you might be surprised at the tension that pervades this enjoyable cheesy movie."—Almar Haflidason, BBC Movies, January 8, 2001. http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2001/01/08bats_2000_review.shtml

Cast and Crew

CAST: Lou Diamond Phillips (Sheriff Kinsey); Dina Meyer (Dr. Sheila Casper); Leon (Jimmy Sands); Carlos Jacott (Dr. Tobe Hodge); Bob Gunton (Dr. Alexander McCabe); David Shawn Mc-Connell (Deputy Munn); Marcia Dangerfield (Mayor Branson); Oscar Rowland (Dr. Swanbeck); Tim Whitaker (Quint); Juliana Johnson (Emma); Ned Bellamy (Major Reid).

CREW: Destination Films Presents a Louis Morneau Film. *Casting:* Laura Schiff. *Costume Designer:* Alexis Scott. *Music:* Graeme Revell. *Production Designer:* Philip J.C. Duffin. *Film Editor:* Glenn Garland. *Director of Photography:* George Mooradian. *Executive Producers:* Steven Stabler, Brent Baum, John Logan, Dale Pollock. *Produced by:* Brad Jenket, Louise Rosner. *Written by:* John Logan. *Directed by:* Louis

SYNOPSIS: Wild-life zoologist Dr. Sheila Casper (Meyer) is flown to Texas by the CDC over a biological emergency: genetically-engineered omnivorous bats. A gaggle of the malevolent creatures, created by the mad Dr. McCabe (Gunton), have roosted near the town of Gallup, Texas, and begin dining on the locals. Gallup's sheriff, Kinsey (Phillips), Casper's sassy assistant, Jimmy (Leon), and Casper set out to destroy the bats' subterranean base of operations: an abandoned mine outside of town. While they struggle to defeat the ferocious monsters, the military plans to airbomb the town of Gallup, hoping to wipe it—and the bats—off the face of the Earth.

COMMENTARY: This movie has bats in the belfry. Seriously, *Bats* is one achingly stupid "science run amok" film. The movie attempts to mitigate it's obvious stupidity with abundant blood and guts, frenzied, adrenalin-provoking camerawork and over-the-top cartoon characterizations, but nothing can distract from the sheer, relentless flow of nonsense the movie throws at the screen. If Michael Bay ever made a movie about killer *Bats*, this is what it would look and sound like.

When a movie is so cheerfully and egregiously dumb, it's tough to know where to start picking things apart. Perhaps the most significant problem is the clichéd, exaggerated, off-the-shelf characters that populate the movie and generally act in hysterical fashion. Every one of these characters you have likely seen before a million times, but in *Bats* it's like the characters were actually genetically engineered to be stupid.

Dr. Sheila Casper, played by talented Dina Meyer, is the heroic scientist and protagonist of the piece. Yet she is so talented and precise firing a gun that you have to wonder whether her environmentally-friendly Dad—after teaching her how to gently stroke captive bats—also showed her how to blow them up real good too.

And this scientist, this brilliant expert in "wild life zoology" slings snappy comebacks even faster than bullets. "You might as well say goodbye to that little balance of nature thing we had going," she smart-mouths at one point.

When she's not quipping, Sheila's busy stating the obvious: "This

sort of thing is not supposed to happen!" Or making declarations which blatantly contradict the physical evidence. After she performs an autopsy on a corpse attacked by a bat, she says "Bats do not kill people." Then she says they are the "gentlest" things she has ever seen. Really? Even given the findings of that autopsy?

And you have to wonder just how smart this plucky scientist is since she continues to wear a low-cut sleeveless shirt, even though bats are strafing and attacking everywhere. And don't even get me started on the scene in which she deflects bats by using a fire extinguisher as a baseball bat.

Next up is Leon as Jimmy Sands, the African American member of the team and a shucking-and-jiving insult to black people everywhere. Naturally, he's the movie's comic relief and so constantly spouts clichés related to his skin color. "You messed with the wrong brother this time!" and so on.

The film's mad scientist, played by Bob Gunton, is so stark raving bonkers that no government agency on the planet would let him near a laboratory. Not since the 1950s has a scientist tampered so egregiously in God's domain ... and loved it. What's his motive for creating killer bats: "Because I'm a scientist. That's what we do. Make things better."

People die, and all Gunton says is, "This will give me time to review my work. See what went wrong...." Seriously, it's a wonder nobody shoots him.

Later, the character mistakenly concludes that his genetically-created bat creations love him and won't do him harm. "Don't you see? They want me." He then walks out to the bats ... and promptly gets torn apart.

To make this abundantly clear: Gunton's character is not misunderstood and is not deluded, he's just plain evil. He panders to the anti-intellectual strain in America: the belief that all scientists must be crazy egg-heads who would just as soon destroy the human race as save it.

And in the movie's funniest moment, we see that Gunton's scientist actually made the bats in his own image; they have his face. Seriously, look at Gunton, and then study the close-ups of the monster bats. They've been made to resemble their master. It's a crazy shot, and the temptation is to laugh, but *Bats* takes itself pretty seriously.

Unfortunately, even the bat general doesn't have the sharpest fangs in the cave. There he hangs, upside down, on his perch underground, surrounded by thousands upon thousands of hibernating

soldier bats. Two humans enter the cave far below to try to freeze the chamber (and kill the bats), and what does the bat general do? He attacks alone.

Bats boasts the subtlety of a sledgehammer. It's extreme. EXTREME. It's a welcome quality in the post- *Scream* era that the movie is mostly irony free (save for a movie marquee showing *Nosferatu*), but it is also intelligence free. The writers have just thrown all of these 1990s ideas into a blender. There's genetic engineering, there's a conspiracy by the government, there's wildlife gone crazy, there's a town sheriff trying to protect his people. It's like *Jurassic Park* meets *Phantoms* meets *Outbreak* meets *The X-Files* ... only considerably dumber.

There are some individual shots worth admiring in the film. I love the moment set outside, at night, when a million bat eyes suddenly open, aware of an oncoming threat. That's authentically creepy. Some of the shaky-cam tactics during the sustained attack on the town are also effective. The last shot of *Bats* shows one bat almost escaping the underground cave until a loud truck rolls by and crushes it underneath a wheel.

After the hyper-kinetic, over-the-top antics in this movie, you'll feel run over too.

***The Blair Witch Project* * * * ***

Critical Reception

"Forget the astonishing hype, spin-offs and spoofs this movie generated when it was released—this is the first movie that genuinely understands fear."—Michael Atkinson and Laurel Shifrin, *Flickipedia: Perfect Films for Every Occasion, Holiday, Mood, Ordeal and Whim*, Chicago Review Press, 2007, page 21

"How this movie was made has everything to do with its reception. It is a happy confluence of form and function.... [T]he movie is not without the kind of flaws that come with a lack of polish—some dull spots and repetition, for example. But the inexplicably terrifying ending is good for a month's worth of nightmares—no small thing for a movie in such a saturated field."—Jami Bernard, *The New York Daily News*, "The Blair Witch

Project," July 14, 1999

"The horror movie sensation of the past five years, *The Blair Witch Project* strips away all of the genre's recent Post-Modern gimmicks for a bone-chilling return to basics. The way this ultra-low-budget shocker was hyped as a true story by spoof news reports on the Internet may have rewritten the rules of movie marketing, but beneath its witty reality-television surface lies a timeless nightmare yarn."—Stephen Dalton, *The Times*, "Film of the Week: *The Blair Witch Project*," October 19, 2002

"It examines the boundary between the real and the imaginary, the amateur and the professional, the sincere and the manufactured. As far as the audience is concerned, it's a game, the aim being to spot the moment when assumed emotion escalates into the real thing, for there's an undeniable whiff of fear coming off those faces on the screen."—Sandra Hall, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 12, 1999

"The greatest impediment to enjoying this movie was neither the shaky-cam nor the low production values; it was the advance hype. The words 'scarier than' were bandied about so recklessly in the press and on the Internet that unfavorable—and unfair—comparisons were inevitable. I prepared for that first screening by reminding myself that, contrary to popular hyperbole, *Blair Witch* would probably not be as suspenseful or meticulously constructed as *Halloween*, as viscerally frightening as *The Exorcist* nor as potentially traumatizing as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Not that I was walking into the theatre that night with a negative attitude—far from it. I was simply trying to clear any unrealistic expectations from my mind. And what do you know? I found myself enjoying a highly innovative and original film that succeeded entirely on its own terms."—John Bowen, *Rue Morgue*

"Beyond the marketing of the film (which in many ways created more interesting content than was visible in the film itself), what do we really have when all is said and done? As a producer of stress, rather than the anxiety we expect from horror films, *The Blair Witch Project* was at least something different, if exhausting, and offered little of the catharsis that horror films typically offer. There was an honesty in the film-making, if only for the much maligned performances of its stars, who at least offered a fresh

reality—there was very little that seemed like acting—this was behavior on display. The final image, however, of a suddenly falling camera, is as creepy as any visual found in recent horror films. While that image was scary, the rest of the film, strangely, was not—this was not a film created from a director's vision—it had no coherent voice, but that doesn't dull the effect. In many ways, however, this film announced the potential for web-driven video presentations. I suspect its influence is greater than any of us realizes (or would admit). *Paranormal Activity* would take this concept to new heights a decade later."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"One of the most overrated horror films ever, and certainly the most overrated of the 1990s. Other than some tense moments in the conclusion, there isn't much in this film that comes across as anything but an amateur, misdirected mess. The shaky camera doesn't help matters. One of the earliest examples of the power of Internet marketing."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Heather Donohue (Heather); Joshua Leonard (Josh); Michael Williams (Michael); Bob Griffith (Fisherman); Jim King (Interviewer); Sandra Sanchez (Waitress); Mark Mason (Man); Patricia De Cou (Mary Brown).

CREW: Artisan Entertainment and Haxan Films present a film by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez. *Art Director:* Ricardo R. Moreno. *Production Designer:* Ben Rock. *Executive Producers:* Bob Eick, Kevin J. Foxe. *Co-Producer:* Michael Monello. *Produced by:* Gregg Hale, Robin Cowe. *Written, edited and directed by:* Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes

SYNOPSIS: In 1994, three film students, Heather (Donohue), Josh (Leonard) and Michael (Williams) disappeared in the Maryland woods near a town called Burkittsville. Sometime later, their film footage is discovered. What their raw footage depicts is troubling. On a hike into the woods to find a local graveyard, the youngsters become irrevocably lost in the woods. Confused and combative, the three students are also unable to explain the strange events that occur every night, events that may have something to do with a local legend, the

COMMENTARY: As many non-plussed film critics will happily attest, *The Blair Witch Project* is a messy and chaotic film. But the critical thing to understand about this 1999 *cause célèbre* is that it is gloriously messy and chaotic in a fashion that is both extremely frightening and which reflects some cogent truths about our human existence, and even the American cultural experience circa the mid to late 1990s.

Depending on your perspective, this inventive effort from Sanchez and Myrick either concerns three students who are bedeviled by their own arrogance and incompetence or are bedeviled by something infinitely worse and more terrifying: a physics-defying, immortal witch.

It is either the greatest shaggy dog story ever recounted, a chasing-your-tail story about three kids who get lost in the woods and come to a bad end. Or it is a story about three cursed kids led to their inevitable doom, *Hansel & Gretel*– style by the supernatural.

Whichever answer is the "right" one *The Blair Witch Project* is a living, breathing paean to the most terrifying aspect of human life: ambiguity. The movie is available to multiple interpretations, and the visuals of the film artistically reflect that fact. Sometimes the audience watches as events unfold on film stock; sometimes the audience watches footage on videotape. Sometimes there is sound recorded; sometimes there isn't.

Sometimes, the players in the drama "stage" their environs for a school documentary project they are preparing, and sometimes they are overcome by spontaneous events, by the reality of nature (or the monster) that surrounds them. In short, the film splinters the narrative both visually and thematically, and then asks the audience— as the primary percipients of the material—to attempt to discern facts, even with all the gaps, even with all the shifts in format.

Because of the tabloid nature of television in the late 1990s, and the increasingly "he said/she said" political-spin of the new 24-hour news cable shows commenting endlessly on such matters as the Clinton Impeachment, *The Blair Witch Project* says something very important about us. It reflects our nation's sudden, apparent inability — even with abundant and easy technology—to easily see "truth." We can't even agree on facts anymore.

Like many great horror films before it, *The Blair Witch Project*

concludes without explanation and ultimately reveals no certainty. This is not a concern, however. On the contrary, this unresolved anxiety is part of the movie's incredible charm and enduring power. Like *The Birds* (1962) or *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) the answer to many a riddle is left up to the viewer to sort out in this film. The mission of the resourceful viewer is to grab the dangling threads of the ambiguous narrative and somehow tie together various strands in hopes of finding meaning or order. This is an activity I cherish as a viewer and as a critic. It is the reason why films exist, to foster further thought, to encourage debate and passionately provoke individual responses.



Heather (Heather Donohue) stages a confessional-style apology in *The Blair Witch Project* (1999).

This is also, as I've noted, an activity that reflects our human life and explains one reason our existence often proves terrifying. We don't get answers all the time for why things happen. Often, events that most dramatically affect us happen outside our vision and our control.

Why do planes crash? Why do some unlucky souls board planes that crash? Why does a person we love become afflicted with a brain tumor, or some other disease?

In an aggressive, post-modern, technologically-savvy way, that's what *The Blair Witch Project* is all about: the struggle to assemble a sense of order out of pixelized images that don't make sense in a traditional or conventional way. In the hyper, information-overload era of the Internet and 24-hour news cycles, *The Blair Witch Project* asks us to fill in the blanks, to imagine the horrors that our eyes didn't actually witness.

To some people hoping to see a "creature feature," this seemed

like a cop-out: the movie didn't show any witch. But again, *The Blair Witch Project* echoes reality with great fidelity. When was the last time an amateur filmmaker caught footage of a witch and uploaded it to YouTube? This movie is all about the things that can't be seen, can't be quantified, can't be recorded or processed. It's about people who record endless footage on their video camera but don't see anything. This idea tells us something important: information doesn't always provide clarity. Sometimes it merely confounds or obfuscates. Again, in the information overkill age of the Internet, that's an interesting point for a horror film to debate.

In a very important way, *The Blair Witch Project* also concerns the ways that mass media often shields the viewer from reality, distancing viewers from it. Americans have been conditioned to huge Hollywood disaster films, and so when the World Trade Center was destroyed in vast, white plumes of ash and smoke, all anybody can say is that it looks like it's a movie. The images of destruction are replayed again and again, until they lose their original power. Until they become simply a rerun over voiceovers. The reality of the violence is lost. The reality of human suffering is not accounted for. The channel can be turned or the TV itself can be turned off.

Late in the film, Joshua picks up Heather's video camera and peers through the LCD viewfinder. "It's not quite reality," he recognizes. "It's totally like, filtered reality. You can pretend everything isn't quite the way it is."

He's right. The audience is accustomed to the rules of filmmaking or TV production, where the frame is structured rigorously, and compositions of film grammar symbolize certain, concrete concepts. But life isn't like that. Life is disordered. It doesn't exist within a frame. We can't intuit meaning out of "character blocking" in real life, or by lighting either. The artifice of the film frame, or the TV picture, in some sense, insulates the audience from reality.

"It's all I fucking have left," Heather finally replies, desperately. Her answer is thus that a safe, fake reality is preferable to a real and uncertain one. As long as the camera is rolling, as long as she is "making a movie," the reality of her terror can be contained. Josh understands this too, instructing her on her motivation in the "scene" ("You're lost. There's nobody here to help you") and then he encourages her to write them "a happy ending."

The final shot of *The Blair Witch Project*, a cockeyed view of Michael standing face against the wall (away from the camera) represents the ultimate filmic disorder, a violation of blocking protocol that implies nothing less than death. After nearly ninety

minutes of contentious bickering, close-up confessionals, camaradie-building two-shots and the like, the film's final view of Mike—turned from the camera in shame and subjugation—is the ultimate negation, a soundless rejection of the camera, of media itself. In a video-obsessed, news-saturated society, this positioning represents the ultimate death. The subject denies the camera his face and is therefore no more.



Lost in the *Blair Witch* Lost in the woods. Something is after Heather (Donohue) in *The Blair Witch Project*.

This shot also harks back to one of the many local stories told in the film, that of a 1940s serial killer Rustin Parr (an anagram for Rasputin) who would abduct children by the twos, and make one face the corner while he killed the other. Without exposition or explanation, the ending shot recalls this tale, and makes the audience aware, visually that this is what is occurring with these children, with these youngsters. Michael is facing the corner ... and Heather is being killed. Who or what is doing the killing, however, remains a mystery. The evil remains unseen.

In broader terms, *The Blair Witch Project* paints a telling picture of young adults in the 1990s. These adults cuss like sailors and debate television and film (with allusions to *Gilligan's Island*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Deliverance*, and other pop cultural touchstones). Furthermore, they seek to become filmmakers themselves, a signifier of the universal, new "American dream" of the Clinton Age: success in the movie industry, thereby assuring at least fifteen minutes of fame.

These three young adults are likeable, but they are also

supremely arrogant. They can hike to a place they've never been before, they can successfully use equipment they've never used before, and can read a map they've never really studied. That's their belief, that's the illusion of control. Because they are so used to their comfortable, leisurely, technological existence, they can't countenance the idea that they are out of their depth in the woods. "It's very hard to get lost in America these days, let alone stay lost," Heather insists, ignoring the fact that the group is, plainly, lost.

Contributing to the feeling of youthful arrogance, Heather, Joshua and Leonard mock the locals to some degree, especially "Crazy" Mary. Then, they knock over a pile of witch stones, a transgression which may be the very thing that catches the witch's eye. In the end, Heather gains some awareness of her arrogance and, in a reality TV-style talking head confessional, and one of the film's most famous shots, she apologizes to the parents of Josh and Michael, whom she assumes will watch her footage. "I was very naïve," she admits. "It was my project. And I insisted. I insisted on everything."

My friend and mentor, the late Johnny Byrne, a script-editor for *Space: 1999* (1975) and creator of the British series *Heartbeat*, once shared with me his admiration for *The Blair Witch Project*. He told me that he felt so strongly about the production because the film had used all its weaknesses as strengths.

What he meant by that is that *The Blair Witch Project* does a lot with very, very little. Without special effects to support it, the film hinges on small but powerful terrors unleashed at just the right moment. Like a bag of bloody, human teeth, found outside the tent. Or a brief pan through a graveyard of weird, pagan icons.

And since the movie could not afford to show a monster, it goes out of its way not to feature one at all, making the Blair Witch's existence a source of debate and mystery, thereby enhancing terror.

Without being able to afford sets and a large crew, the film makes the most of its *Hansel & Gretel* premise of three kids endlessly circling the same territory (and crossing the same log) over and over again, caught in a supernatural Möbius strip from Hell. But again, without a real, tangible witch, even this can be interpreted as an example of incompetence, of the tech-savvy kids' inability to survive in nature, absent their toys, televisions and gadgets.

Even some inconsistencies in the script become a net plus in this new paradigm, hinting at things unseen or barely expressed, and giving them additional weight.

As I have written before, horror often works best when simple, universal stories are presented. At its core, and outside the post-

modern commentary on the filter of media distancing viewers from reality, *The Blair Witch Project* highlights a primeval fear: getting lost in the woods, with seemingly no escape. It's as simple as that; these kids are alone, confused and, like most of us, afraid of the dark. Every day they stay lost in the woods equals another night during which they must huddle in their tents, afraid of the sounds of the forest ... and of the witch.

As the movie gets into its rhythm, the audience starts to dread the inevitability of sundown too, of the ever-increasing incursions of the dark night.

A fear of the dark? A fear of getting lost in the woods? It's been a long time since a horror movie functioned so well on such simplicity, and if anything, horror films went the other way in the 1990s.

Filmmakers went for overblown literary adaptations like *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, *Bram Stoker's Dracula* and *Interview with a Vampire*, they went for complicated, Pirandellian narratives about the links between reality and fiction (*In the Mouth of Madness* and *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*), they walked a tightrope between comedy and horror (*Army of Darkness*, *Scream*). But *The Blair Witch Project* sows existential terror more than any of those films (some of which are great, by the way). It is riveting, and terrifying.



The Blair Witch Brain Trust: co-directors Dan Myrick (left) and Eduardo Sanchez (right), on the set of the decade's most controversial horror film.

This film lives up to the hype: it is as scary as *The Exorcist*, and maybe then some. Is it as carefully crafted? Of course not, but movies don't have to arrive at the same destination via the same route. The film's *Hansel & Gretel* narrative, set in the modern age, frees the imagination, encourages empathy for these kids, and generates, in its terrifying ending, nothing less than throat-tightening hysteria.

Was the movie's huge box office success a result of clever marketing? Perhaps so. But again, what does it matter? Effective marketing is not a reason to dislike a film, at least not a legitimate one. Horror fans should have cheered *The Blair Witch Project* for what it accomplished, with so very little. In the age of CGI atrocities like *The Haunting*, it brought horror back to its core, important values, particularly the generation of terror by the power of suggestion, by hinting at the truth, but not showcasing it.

The Blair Witch Project is the best horror films of the 1990s, and going further, one of the essential titles in the genre over the last fifty years as well.

LEGACY: One of the most profitable independent horror films ever produced, *The Blair Witch Project* produced a critically-reviled sequel in 2000, *Book of Shadow; Blair Witch 2*. It also set off a miniboom of "found footage films" in the 2000s, including the underwhelming Romero film *Diary of the Dead* (2007), the incredible and harrowing *REC* (2007), the big-budget monster film *Cloverfield* (2008) from J.J. Abrams and the mainstream, dumbed-down variation on *Blair Witch*, the crowd-pleasing *Paranormal Activity* (2009).

The Bone Collector * *

Critical Reception

"Noyce seems to have decided to go with grisly detail, yet play down suspense; there's sometimes a listless pace to scenes, a surprising lack of tension at key moments. The relationship between Donaghy and Rhyme is important (and potentially interesting), but the actors have to work against some clunky, obvious dialogue and unnecessary detail (stuff about Donaghy's past is annoying and redundant).... But things really fall apart in

the final stages of the film, as the killer is revealed, there's a nasty confrontation and then a bizarrely chirpy resolution. At this point, *The Bone Collector* moves from psychological thriller to absurdity."—Philippa Hawker, *The Age*, "Thriller Leaves Too Much to Chew On," November 18, 1999

Cast and Crew

CAST: Denzel Washington (Lincoln Rhyme); Angelina Jolie (Amelia Donaghy); Queen Latifah (Thelma); Michael Rooker (Captain Cheney); Mike McGlone (Det. Kenny Solomon); Luis Guizman (Eddit Ortiz); Leland Orser (Richard Thompson); John Benjamin Hickey (Dr. Barry Lehman); Ed O'Neill (Paulie Selotti); Bobby Cannavale (Amelia's Boyfriend); Richard Zeman (Lt. Hanson); Olivia Birkelund (Lindsay Rubin); Gary Swanson (Alan Rubin); Frank Fontaine (Grandfather); Zena Grey (Granddaughter); Sonya Riddle (Nurse); Daniel C Brochu (N.Y.U. Student).

CREW: Universal Pictures and Columbia Pictures present a Bregman Production, a Philip Noyce Film *Casting:* Bernard Telsey, William Cantler, David Vaccari. *Music:* Craig Armstrong. *Costume Designer:* Odette Gadoury. *Executive Producers:* Michael Klawitter, Dan Jinks. *Film Editor:* William Hoy. *Production Designer:* Nigel Phelps. *Director of Photography:* Dean Semler. *Based on the book by:* Jeffery Deaver. *Produced by:* Louis A. Stroller, Michael Bregman, Martin Bregman. *Written by:* Jeremy Iacone. *Directed by:* Philip Noyce. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 118 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Paraplegic cop and best-selling crime book author Lincoln Rhyme (Washington) is asked by a perplexed NYPD to consult on a case involving the abduction of a wealthy New York couple and a possible serial killer. Lincoln is assisted by Amelia Donaghy (Jolie), a rookie cop who was the first on the scene of a crime, and who brilliantly preserved the evidence before a rain storm. Using Amelia as his eyes and ears at the crime scenes, Lincoln attempts to catch the serial killer before he strikes again.

COMMENTARY: As *The Bone Collector* reminds the audience, "crime scenes are three dimensional." Too bad that's not true of all serial

killer movies because this must be one of the most by-the-numbers reiterations of the tired 1990s formula. Although the death scenes staged by the brilliant serial killer are all pretty horrific, the film itself is mired in clichés so thick that the movie actually becomes laughable.

Here, Denzel Washington plays Lincoln Rhymes who, if we are to believe our eyes and ears, happens to be the only crime scene investigator in the city of New York. He is paralyzed, however, after an accident on the job (cliché #1) and needs another officer to be his arms and legs. That's where Angelina Jolie's Amelia character comes in, a wet-behind-the-ears cop with great instincts and a tragic history of her own: her father's suicide. In other words, she's a variation on Clarice Starling (cliché #2).

The serial killer leads the new partners, Rhyme and Amelia, on a wild-goose chase, to false leads (cliché #3), but what he really wants is revenge against Rhyme (cliché #4). There's also a wrong-headed superior, played by Michael Rooker (cliché #5). At the end, the talking killer shows up and explains all (cliché #6), but after planning a series of virtually perfect, complex crimes, gets beaten by a paralyzed man in time for a happy ending.

So yes, *The Bone Collector* follows the paradigm of the serial killer movie, but it doesn't really offer many twists and turns. Instead, it takes leftovers and presents them as a brand new meal. Director Philip Noyce is a great director of thrillers, and the movie's execution is far better than the screenplay deserves.

Some of the murders, for instance, are absolutely horrific. One woman is scalded to death, and the movie really lets the audience have it. The crime scene teams learn where she is trapped and what is going to happen to her, but can't reach her in time.

Another scene involves hungry rats gnawing on a victim while he is still alive, and, well, it's pretty nauseating too. Once again, the execution is superlative.

The only point where Noyce's stylistic skill can't help the movie is in the talking killer-type finale, which reveals the serial murderer to be whiny, nebbish Leland Orser, a character literally from out of left-field, and one who doesn't seem to boast the mental discipline to have orchestrated all the film's highly-involved, perfectly-timed crimes.

An example of an absolutely exhausted subgenre, this one should have been called *The Cliché Collector*.

***Candyman 3: Day of the Dead* * (DTV)**

CAST: Tony Todd (Candyman); Donna D'Errico (Caroline McKeever); Alexia Robinson (Tamara); Leonardo Gueria (Little Boy); Mark Adair-Rios (Miguel Velasco); Wade Andrew Williams (Samuel); Robert O'Reilly (Sacco); Nick Corri (David De La Paz); Ernie Hudson, Jr. (Jamal Matthews); Elizabeth Hayes (Annie)

CREW: Artisan Films presents an Aurora Production, a film by Turi Meyer. *Casting:* Michael Greer, Robert Nassif. *Production Designer:* Marc Greville-Masson. *Costume Designer:* Sylvia Vega-Vasquez. *Music:* Adam Gorgoni. *Director of Photography:* Michael Wojciehowski. *Film Editor:* Frederick Wardell. *Executive Producer:* Andrew Golov. *Written by:* Turi Meyer, Al Septien. *Produced by:* Al Septien. *Directed by:* Turi Meyer. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In Los Angeles, Caroline McKeever (D'Errico), last surviving descendent of Candyman (Todd), helps to set-up a showing at a local art gallery of the collected paintings of the tragic slave, Daniel Robataille. Before long, the beestung boogeyman is back, terrorizing Caroline and the Latino community on the eve of the "Day of the Dead," the festival that celebrates death as a part of life.

COMMENTARY: *Candyman 3: Day of the Dead* is pretty much the same movie as *Candyman 2: Farewell to the Flesh*, except without the overwhelming sense of fear and the adequate production values. A total rehash, this last film in the Candyman saga misses the mark by a wide margin, and doesn't even remain true to some aspects of the character's mythos. About the only interesting element of the film is the setting: a post- O.J. Simpson, post Rodney King Los Angeles, where corrupt cops reign, and people live in fear and suspicion.

In *Candyman 2*, the story concerned a descendent of Daniel's named Annie (Kelly Rowan) who learned about the curse of her family. A major setting for the film was the New Orleans Mardi Gras Festival. The method to destroy Candyman involved an old antique, his mirror.

All the same story ingredients are shuffled around here, to lesser impact. Caroline McKeever (played poorly by bottle-blond Donna

D'Errico) is Annie's daughter, and thus a descendent of Daniel, who learns about the curse of her family. The film's major setting is a festival too, the Day of the Dead celebration in Los Angeles. And it is not the mirror that is the key to Candyman's destruction here, but one of his own paintings.

There are a few creepy images in this film, like an egg yoke that bleeds as a bee crawls out of it, but for the most part, this second sequel boasts all the horror impact of your average afternoon soap opera. Though Tony Todd, as usual, is effective as a grim embodiment of death, there's something a bit off this time about his pursuit of yet another blond woman, and in this case, such an insipid one at that. Looking at Todd and D'Errico, you don't believe for a second that this dignified, regal "monster" would have anything to do with this woman.

At the end of the film, when Candyman is told that "no one will ever call your name again," my first instinct was to blame this movie for ruining a perfectly serviceable and occasionally inspired franchise.

A better title for this movie would have been *Candyman 3: Dead on Arrival*.

***Children of the Corn 666: Isaac's Return* * 1/2**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Nancy Allen (Rachel Colby); Natalie Ramsey (Hannah Martin); Paul Popowich (Gabriel); Alix Koromzay (Cora); John Patrick White (Matt); Nathan Bexton (Jesse); William Prael (Jake); Sydney Bennett (Morgan); John Franklin (Isaac); Stacy Keach (Doc Michaels).

CREW: A Blue Rider Pictures Production of A Kari Skogland Film. *Executive Producers:* Jenni Sherwood, Louis Spiegler. *Casting:* Ed Mitchell, Robyn Ray. *Costume Designer:* Niklas J. Palm. *Production Designer:* Stuart Blatt. *Music:* Terry Michael Hood. *Film Editor:* Troy T. Takaki. *Director of Photography:* Richard Clabaugh. *Based on the Short story "Children of the Corn" by:* Stephen King. *Produced by:* Bill Berry, Jeff Geoffrey, Walter Josten. *Written by:* Tim Sulka, John Franklin. *Directed by:* Kari Skogland. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 82 minutes.

INCANTATION: "Jim Jones, David Koresh, Hitler ... they all came at the right time. Why not Isaac?"—Dialogue from *Children of the Corn 666: Isaac's Return*

SYNOPSIS: Nineteen years after the original massacre in isolated, mid-western Gatlin, cult leader Isaac (Franklin) awakens from a coma and sets about realizing his prophecy of a new generation of "the chosen." At the same time, nineteen-year-old Hannah (Ramsey) travels to Gatlin— her home town—to learn the identity of her birth mother. She finds Rachel Colby (Allen), a woman who gave up her baby in an attempt to keep Isaac's prophecy from coming true.

COMMENTARY: *Children of the Corn 666: Isaac's Return* is not a good horror movie, but it is an incredible simulation. The director, Kari Skogland, proves exceptionally skilled in crafting powerful and stylish visuals. In broad terms, her film features a nice, crisp, sun-baked, golden canvas that is eminently fitting for the corn-centric material. Also, the movie is dominated by some fine "jolt" moments that catch the viewer by surprise, at least early on.

At the heart of *Children of the Corn 666* stands a notion quite relevant to post-Columbine America. How does a town move beyond a horrible event like the Gatlin massacre of 1984? *What's the second act?* Is there redemption, or does the evil always remain ... just waiting for another resurrection?

Unfortunately, this good idea is mostly unexcavated, and when present, is wrapped up entirely in late-1990s horror clichés. In particular, the surprise-ending villain quips and smiles like he's Jack Nicholson's Joker in *Batman* (1989), or a low-rent Skeet Ulrich in a *Scream* (1996) knockoff. And, failing any narrative substance, Skogland is reduced to staging the same two tricks repeatedly.

First, Hannah, our lead, is attacked by people who suddenly and inexplicably disappear. Don't ask how or why. They just do. Second, Hannah is surprised by the same mental patient, Jake, who pops into frame with accordant soundtrack bells-and-whistles so frequently, he's the movie's equivalent of Where's Waldo.

The follower of the *Children of the Corn* saga, if there is such an animal, will note that this fifth sequel brings John Franklin back to the series, as both writer and supporting actor. His script is smart

enough to meditate on the idea of cults in America (think Waco's David Koresh, who gets a call-out), yet dumb enough to end on a silly, unmotivated apocalyptic note. Young Hannah leaves Gatlin impregnated by the force of evil and never once brings up the idea of terminating the pregnancy.

Abortion is still legal in America, sister. And if it brings an end to the direct-to-tv *Children of the Corn* series, it's not just a choice, it's a moral imperative.

***The Coroner* 1/2 (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jane Longnecker (Emma); Dean St. Louis (Leon Uraski); Robert J. Pouliot (Striker); Bob McFarland (Manley); David Aimerito (George); Eric Gerleman (D.A. Flossman); Christine Burke (Nadine); John Godfrey (Photographer); Melinda Messenger (Nurse); Stacey Leigh Mobley (Stripper) Roberta Gray (Aida); Bryn Pryor (Allan); Patrick Curran (Chasio); Nicholas Rockwood (Boa).

CREW: Concorde and Califilm Presents a film by Juan A. Mas. *Castings:* Jan Glaser, Jerry Whitworth. *Music:* Concorde Community Music Machine. *Production Designer:* NAVA. *Film Editors:* Dexter Adriano, Bryan Forte. *Executive Producers:* Stan Streeter. *Produced by:* Mike Upton. *Written by:* Geralyn Ruane. *Directed by:* Juan A. Mas. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 75 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A serial killer claims his latest victim, a stripper. A dedicated attorney, Emma (Longnecker), is assaulted next by the madman, the Los Angeles coroner Leon Uraski (St. Louis). Emma attempts to convince the authorities that Uraski is a murderer, but nobody believes her. Emma decides to take matters into her own hands, even as Uraski evades every attempt to expose him.

COMMENTARY: Because film is a collaborative art form, the vast majority of movies produced just don't dip below a certain threshold

of believability or below, for lack of a better word, stupidity.

Because so many hands are involved in the making of a film—from producer to writer, from editor to director, from executive producer to actor—big narrative issues are caught, weighed and, if found wanting, rectified. Again, that's true to at least a certain extent. But *The Coroner* is a movie so dopey, so idiotic, so utterly absent in intelligence that it serves as a notable exception to that rule.

An ugly serial killer movie populated by ugly, stupid people, *The Coroner* revolves around a tough-as-nails attorney named Emma, played by Jane Longnecker. She's an advocate for the people and takes the cases nobody else will take.

Given that Emma is a successful lawyer, the audience must assume she has some working knowledge and respect for the law. Yet before the film has finished, Emma sets a bomb in the home of her nemesis, the killer Uraski. Then, after that, she breaks into his house and holds him at gunpoint. After being released by the police, she does it again, capturing Uraski, wrapping him up in a carpet, and abducting him! Given these considerable and repeated infractions, police are not likely to believe her story that he is a serial killer. On the contrary, it is she who appears to be a nutcase.

Often, serial killer movies involve a clever villain who tricks the hero into acting rashly or impulsively in the moment. True. But this is just stupidity: *a brilliant lawyer dresses up in a black "covert ops" hat and costume and attempts to bomb a house in residential L.A.?* What is this, *Mission: Impossible*? Wouldn't she at least have the good sense to hire someone else to do the job?

Scenes are strung together in *The Coroner* for no rhyme or reason. Periodically, we get random montages of violent scenes that don't appear related to the narrative and seem spliced in from other productions to pad the running time. For instance, I recognized Russ Thorn and his drill from *Slumber Party Massacre* (1982) during one montage.

Occasionally, sex scenes just start up out of the blue, even though we have no idea who the characters involved are. Uraski sneaks into a room (an office? a lobby? a hotel?) during the spontaneous sex act and hides in the corner—in plain view. After the man departs, leaving his partner behind, Uraski kills the woman. Again, we have no idea who she is, or how Uraski knew to find her there ... having sex with some guy whom we don't know.

In terms of serial killer motivation, the repulsive, flabby Uraski in *The Coroner* kills women who have attempted suicide and survived. He feels they really *should* have died, and that he is doing God's work by

ending their existences. It's a silly motivation, and it doesn't even make much sense. How does he target his victims? You've got to get up close to see the scars on the wrist, right? And how likely is it that all these "unsuccessful" suicides (as the movie terms them) would involve gorgeous, big-breasted hookers and strippers?

There were plenty of bad horror movies in the 1990s, but *The Coroner* is my contender for the absolutely worst. *The Coroner* is not merely dumb and inept it's *brazenly* dumb and inept. The film's cynical, canned, downbeat ending, which sees Emma incarcerated in an insane asylum, will make you want to throw something heavy at your TV set.

Deep Blue Sea * * *

Critical Reception

"The big surprise with *Deep Blue Sea* is that it is not merely another mindless monster movie but the best action-thriller in quite a few years. A film that has giant killer sharks as its main stars cannot help but be associated with Steven Spielberg's 1975 box-office hit, *Jaws*, but there are few other similarities. *Deep Blue Sea* is first and foremost a skillful action-adventure that does not depend for its thrills on the primal fear of sharks, as *Jaws* did. In fact, it is much closer to the *Alien* series, in which the threat came from ferocious creatures that are only briefly seen. Director Renny Harlin (*Die Hard 2*) presents what is essentially one well-done action sequence after another as he takes both his characters and the audience deep underwater and leaves them gasping for breath."—Hans Petrovic, *The Press*, "Thriller Keeps up Breakneck Pace," September 25, 1999, page WE39

" *Deep Blue Sea* is a big, dumb, water-saturated film about hyper-intelligent sharks with a grudge. It's a movie where people get wet and get eaten—picked off, one by one—by post- *Jaws* monsters with a fine sense of comic timing and little respect for authority."—Philippa Hawker, *The Age*, "Well, Isn't This a Fine Mess?" September 29, 1999

Cast and Crew

CAST: Saffron Burrows (Dr. Susan McAlester); Thomas Jane (Carter Blake); L.L. Cool J (Preacher); Samuel L. Jackson (Russell Franklin); Jacqueline McKenzie (Janice Higgins); Michael Rapaport (Tom Scoggins); Stellan Skarsgard (Jim Whitlock); Aida Turturro (Brenda); Christos (Boat Captain).

CREW: Warner Bros Presents with Village Roadshow Pictures a Renny Harlin Film. *Casting:* Christine Sheaks. *Music:* Trevor Rabin. *Shark Action Supervisor:* Walt Conti. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* Jeffrey A. Okun. *Co-Producer:* Rebecca Spikings. *Production Designer:* William Sandell, Joseph Bennett. *Director of Photography:* Stephen Window. *Executive Producers:* Duncan Henderson, Bruce Berman. *Produced by:* Akiva Goldsman, Tony Ludwig, Alan Riche. *Written by:* Duncan Kennedy, Donna Powers, Wayne Powers. *Directed by:* Renny Harlin. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 105 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Corporate mogul and avalanche survivor Russell Franklin (Jackson) travels with an obsessed scientist, Dr. Susan McAlester (Burrows), to the ocean lab Aquatica where Alzheimer's research is being conducted on genetically-enhanced "smart" sharks. Although shark wrangler Carter Blake (Jane), an ex-con, is concerned that the sharks are plotting to escape, his warnings are ignored until the day of a massive storm ... and a scientific experiment designed to extract an Alzheimer's curing hormone from a Gen 3 enhanced shark. The shark escapes, and after destroying a helicopter, invades the compromised facility with two other Gen 1 enhanced sharks. With time running out, Russell Franklin attempts to rally the troops at the lip of Aquatica's diving pool.

COMMENTARY: To paraphrase L.L. Cool J's character, Preacher, in *Deep Blue Sea*: "Even in the nineties ... *standards.*"

Indeed.

There's just no escaping the fact that this Renny Harlin film—essentially *Jurassic Park* meets *Jaws*—is coarse, pandering, derivative and uniformly over-the-top. The film is virtually slathered with whirling pans and zooms, and lacquered with a driving, overly melodramatic score. *Deep Blue Sea* is so broadly and slickly presented, in fact, that it makes Michael Bay look like a sartorial master of restraint and nuance by comparison.

And yet, in spite of the undeniable two-dimensionality of the enterprise, *Deep Blue Sea* succeeds as an effective if deeply unsubtle scare machine, a roller-coaster of terror. If it can't outwit the marvels of *Jaws* or *Jurassic Park*, well, it settles for topping such films by virtue of shocking, gory death scenes. The sharks are bigger, the water is bloodier, and the surprises are super-sized too, especially if you have a fear of the water. The film also has a nice, simple thematic puzzle throughline, an answer to the pertinent question: what does a 3-ton shark think about? The answer is embedded, somewhat cleverly, in the film's title.

At the mechanical, commercial heart of *Deep Blue Sea* is a message about science run amok, particularly genetic science run amok. McAlester has put her dream of curing Alzheimer's ahead of all responsibility, violated the Hartford Compact's "chimera" policy, and in the process created smart shark monsters that she can't control. That's the transgression in specifics, but in general terms it also equates to "arrogance," and that's a trait McAlester shares with Dr Whitlock, her partner in crime. Both pay for those crimes in pretty horrible ways. Whitlock sees his arm bitten off by a genetically-engineered shark in one of the film's most tense, nail-biting scenes. Then while he's still alive, Whitlock's body is used as a projectile to destroy the glass of Aquatica's main lab, thus allowing the shark to gain entry.

We know this is going to happen to Whitlock because: a) he's a smoker ... and that's bad for you in 1990s horror movies; and b) when Franklin exclaims, "What in God's creation?!" Whitlock conceitedly replies, "No ... not his. Ours."

People in horror movies should never favorably compare themselves with the Almighty. Such arrogance must be punished.

And as for McAlester, she's eaten up entirely—chomped into pieces—in the focus group– mandated ending. Originally, she would have survived and Preacher would have died, but pre-release screenings scuttled that ending. Again ... arrogance must be punished.

But *Deep Blue Sea* isn't necessarily effective because of these particular deaths or its not-sosubtle anti-science commentary. It boasts other pleasures. In fact, there's one death scene that literally leaps up at you. Franklin, as played by the film's most well-known actor, Samuel L. Jackson, has been meticulously set up as *Deep Blue Sea*'s caught between a rock and a hard place.

Even open-minded audiences may not be so enamored with Preacher's subplot in *Deep Blue Sea*, which once again finds the indestructible L.L. Cool J cordoned off from his fellow cast-members,

as was the case in *H2O*, while he makes wicked asides and fights a monster. Rather improbably, Preacher survives encounter after encounter with the killer sharks even though his mascot, a parrot, gets eaten, even though he acknowledges, rather lamely, "Brothers never make it out of situations like this. Not ever."



A genetically-engineered super shark threatens Carter Blake (Thomas Jane) in Renny Harlin's *Deep Blue Sea* (1999).

The CGI is also brutal. He rallies the troop; he rightfully expresses fear and disdain for the scientists playing Frankenstein, and—more than any of that—he's prepared for an emergency, having survived an avalanche in the Himalayas.

At about the film's half-way point, Franklin has had his fill of the bickering and accusations of his hysterical fellow survivors and, near a barely-noticed wading pool, launches into an inspirational speech.

It's a speech tailor-made for the talented, charismatic Jackson: colorful, alliterative and the perfect balance of righteous and angry. Jackson commands and holds the screen—as though suddenly we're in a Tarantino film—and then in mid-speech, a shark impolitely cuts him off.

Literally. It's a great B movie moment, a ballsy move by Harlin and a real high point in the film.

Another visually dynamic and extremely harrowing sequence finds the dwindling survivors trapped in Aquatica's elevator silo, climbing a long ladder and seeking sanctuary. The water rises quickly and menacingly below our protagonists and in short order, a shark starts circling in the confined area ... carried up and up to the frightened humans by the buoyant water levels. Meanwhile, a raging fire rains burning debris down upon the fleeing survivors. Talk about being tally lame in this film. It hasn't aged well, but the fact of the matter is it also didn't look so hot back in 1999. This is a sad turn of events because in the scenes with the live-action shark animatronics, the monsters appear very convincing, very large, and very frightening. Furthermore, the CGI, for the most part isn't even needed. After Samuel L. Jackson is pulled into the water pool by the leaping shark, there is no need for a second shot (positioned at ocean bottom), showing fake sharks chewing and ripping apart his CGI body. It's redundant. And it actually lessens the effect of the previous (great) shot. It would have been much better just to have the shark leap up and take Jackson, and then cut to the other survivors, in shock and horror, reacting to his disappearance.



Dr. McAllester (Saffron Burrows) confronts her own creations, monster sharks, in *Deep Blue Sea*.

I can't make a deep intellectual case arguing the merits for *Deep Blue Sea*. Yet it succeeds where other ocean-bound horror films of the era, including *Deep Rising* (1998) and *Virus* (1999), fail. It's never boring and, at times, it's scary. Perhaps this is because sharks are inherently scarier than cyborgs or imaginary sea monsters. Perhaps it's because the dialogue in *Deep Blue Sea* has more attitude and the slight whiff of tongue-in-cheek mockery, or because Renny Harlin ultimately boasts a better facility for staging shocks than either Stephen Sommers or John Bruno.

Deep Blue Sea is pacey, action-packed, and ultimately pretty damn silly. There's nothing "deep" about it. But right down to the pounding rap music at the finale (a genre cliché of the 1990s), the movie goes down easy.

When it's done, you breathe again, unaware that you were holding your breath in the first place.

End of Days * * 1/2

Critical Reception

" *End of Days* is 85 percent explosions and editing idiocy (a window can't break without director Peter Hyams cutting between five different angles) and 15 percent Arnold trying to grow a third dimension."—Michael Atkinson, *The Village Voice*, "Antonioni Snoozes; Arnold Stretches; Greed Is Good Again," November 30, 1999, page 1 of 1

"Names like Thomas Aquinas and Jericho are tossed around, but religious this ain't. It belongs to the genre in which a good guy chases a bad guy and both fall several stories and through a plate glass window only to get up, brush themselves off and continue the chase. It's so intent on telling its story that it cuts quickly from one scene to the next unimpeded by character development or realism."— Brenda Sokolowski, *The Anchorage Press*, "*End of Days*," Volume 8, Edit 48, December 2–8, 1999

" *End of Days* manages to blow up most of its accumulated audience goodwill in a ludicrously extended pseudo-spiritual climax that should simultaneously offend believers and thoroughly irritate non-Christians and other heathens."— Andrew O'Hehir, *Salon*, "*End of Days*: Arnold's Back, with a Jesus Christ Pose," November 24, 1999, page 1 of 1

Cast and Crew

CAST: Arnold Schwarzenegger (Jericho Cane); Gabriel Byrne (The Man); Robin Tunney (Christine); Kevin Pollak (Chicago); CCH Pounder (Detective Marge Francis); Rod Steiger (Father Kovak); Derek O'Connor (Thomas Aquinas); Miriam Margoyles (Mabel); Udo Kier (Head

Priest); Victor Vanado (Albino); Michael O'Hagan (Cardinal); Mark Margolis (Pope); Jack Shearer (Kellogg).

CREW: Universal Studios and Beacon Pictures Presents a film by Peter Hyams. *CASTING:* Jackie Birch. *MUSIC:* John Debney. *CREATURE EFFECTS:* Stan Winston. *VISUAL EFFECTS SUPERVISOR:* Eric Durst. *FILM EDITOR:*

Steven Kemper. *Production Designer*: Richard Holland. *Director of Photography*: Peter Hyams. *Executive Producers*: Mark Abraham, Thomas A. Bliss. *Produced by*: Armyan Bernstein, Bill Border. *Written by*: Andrew W. Marlow. *Directed by*: Peter Hyams. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 123 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In 1999, the year he is destined to conceive the Anti-Christ with a human female, Satan (Byrne) comes to Earth and steals the form of a Wall Street banker. Meanwhile, a suicidal woman, Christine (Tunney), experiences sexual dreams about the Devil in this form. Only a fallen, drunk police officer, Jericho Cane (Schwarzenegger), can protect Christine from becoming the Devil's concubine and in the process save the Earth.

COMMENTARY: In his long movie career, star Arnold Schwarzenegger has battled cult-leaders (*Conan the Barbarian* [1982]), game-show hosts (*The Running Man* [1987]), aliens (*Predator* [1987], shape-shifting machines (*Terminator 2: Judgment Day* [1991]) and even kindergarteners (*Kindergarten Cop* [1990]).

Given this array of colorful nemeses, it was inevitable that the future governor of California would one day battle Old Scratch himself. *End of Days* is that movie, the one that pits Arnie versus Satan.

Directed by Peter Hyams, *End of Days* mixes Christian mythology of the End Times with the burgeoning real-life fears of the changing Millennium. It sets its religious-theme horror in a modern Babel, New York City, and Hyams often adopts a God's eye view of the metropolis. He even stages a horror scene on a subway as a kind of subterranean outcropping of Hell itself.

The specifics of the plot mirror *La Setta*: an innocent woman, here played by Robin Tunney, is being groomed to carry the child of Satan, the Anti-Christ. And, like *The Devil's Advocate* (1997), *End of Days* sees the Devil taking the form of a modern New Yorker, here an investment banker played by Gabriel Byrne. In keeping with the business veneer of the Devil on Earth, the Devil says that the End of Days is simply a "change in management."

End of Days is filled front-to-back with ridiculous but spectacular action sequences, such as the one involving Arnold on a wire,

swinging from a helicopter in pursuit of a rooftop sniper. It's dumb to the max, but looks great anyhow.

In the final battle against an army of Satanists, Arnold brings machine guns and a missile launcher to the party, assuring that there will be plenty of explosions. In the end, the Devil is forced to materialize in his demonic flesh as a gigantic, winged monster. He turns invisible and beats Arnie up. Then he moves into Arnold's body, but Arnie outsmarts the Prince of Darkness by killing himself as the year 2000 finally comes.

As far as I'm concerned, Arnold Schwarzenegger is part of the Holy Trinity, with the other two points represented by John Wayne and Charlton Heston. He is simultaneously a commanding and jovial presence, and has a long history of picking good projects. With *End of Days*, he may have outsmarted himself. Sure, everyone wants to see Schwarzenegger battle the Devil, but the script also calls for the actor to emote in a way that he has, wisely, resisted for the duration of his career.

In particular, there's a sequence in which the Devil taunts Schwarzenegger's detective, Jericho Cane, with images of his dead wife and child. "I can give it all back to you," sayeth Lucifer, tempting the action messiah with a life restored, if only he comes to the Devil's side and tells him the location of Christine, the would-be Devil's bride.

It is here, primarily, that you see Schwarzenegger is out-of-his-depth. He's simply not believable as the tortured, depressed, inward-facing loser cop. His appearance alone runs counter to that description. Depressed, drunken cops do not have a physique like Schwarzenegger's. They do not exercise, let alone body build. The part of Jericho requires more of a worm, one who can turn at the appropriate moment and surprise the Devil with his fortitude. Though it is ultra-cool to pit the greatest action star of a generation against the greatest evil of all time, it's a foregone conclusion which competitor is going to win. Since that's the case, you wish the screenwriters had adjusted, and maybe just had more fun with the contest.

After all, God sent Arnold Schwarzenegger to us for a reason.

***Eyes Wide Shut* * * * ***

Critical Reception

"*Eyes Wide Shut* is Stanley Kubrick's *Hindenburg*. It's not thrilling. It's not sexy. It combines all the flaws that marred his earlier work including a glacial pace, emotional coldness and the sudden eruption of scenes that seem to belong in a different movie."—Jonathan Foreman, *The New York Post*, July 16, 1999, page 39

"Stanley Kubrick's posthumous swan song is suitably inscrutable and atmospheric, and although maybe not Kubrick in his best form, it still beat the hell out of most of the other movies that came out in 1999. If you're looking for a story that makes perfect sense, look elsewhere. If you're looking for powerful ambience, brilliant direction and camerawork, and intriguing characterization, you're in for a surprising treat."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Tom Cruise (Dr. Bill Harford); Nicole Kidman (Alice Harford); Madison Eginton (Helena Harford); Jackie Sawiris (Roz); Sydney Pollack (Victor Ziegler); Leslie Lowe (Illona Ziegler); Peter Benson (Band Leader); Todd Field (Nick Nightingale); Michael Doven (Ziegler's Secretary); Sky Dumont (Sandor Svavozt); Louise Taylor (Gayle); Stewart Thorndike (Nuala); Randall Paul (Harris); Julianne Davis (Amanda "Mandy" Curran); Lisa Leone (Lisa).

CREW: *CASTING:* Denise Chamian, Leon Vitali. *Production Design:* Leslie Tompkins, Roy Walker. *Art Director:* John Fenner. *Costume Designer:* Marit Allen. *Director of Photography:* Larry Smith. *Music:* Jocelyn Pook. *Executive Producer:* Jan Harlan. *Produced by:* Stanley Kubrick. *Written by:* Frederic Raphael and Stanley Kubrick. *Directed by:* Stanley Kubrick. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 159 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Dr. Bill (Cruise) and his wife, Alice (Kidman), attend the party of a wealthy friend, Victor Ziegler (Pollack). At the party, Dr. Bill helps out a prostitute secretly seeing Victor, after what appears to be a drug overdose. Later that night, Bill and Alice return to their apartment and have an argument about sex, and Alice reveals an unfulfilled desire to sleep with another man, a Navy officer she once encountered. This revelation sends Bill out into the night to sow his own wild oats. Unfortunately, he finds himself at a sinister orgy in Upstate New York, one populated by frightening, sadistic individuals

of great wealth. Worse, Bill is unmasked at the event, so that everyone sees him.

COMMENTARY: With the Cold War over in the 1990s, everyone in America was getting hot, apparently.

Stanley Kubrick's final film *Eyes Wide Shut* is a modernized adaptation of Austrian author Arthur Schnitzler's 1925 sexually-frank novella, *Traumnovelle* (a.k.a. "Dream Story"), and the film version arrived just in time to cap off the sex-obsessed 1990s.

Just to refresh, this was the time of the Clinton impeachment over oral sex, as well as the era of jokes about vaginal penetration by cigar.

The 1990s was the era of the Anita Hill/ Clarence Thomas scandal, which involved jokes about pubic hair on Coke soda cans.

From the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" controversy in 1993, another discussion of sex (in this case, homosexuality) debated in the public square, to the ascent of such television as *Ally McBeal* in the latter part of the decade, sex was overtly the obsession of politics and national dialogue.

Gennifer Flowers, Paula Jones, Ellen De-Generes and her 1997 coming out of the closet with the "Puppy" episode of her popular sitcom, Woody Allen and Soon Yi shattering established taboos of blended families to get married...

Need I continue?

One can list dozens of 1990s "news" stories revolving around sex. And many involved an unpleasant, seedy side to sex: infidelity in the case of the commander in chief, sexual harassment in the case of a then-prospective Supreme Court Nominee, and so forth.

Had Clinton been elected to the presidency with "eyes wide shut," since Americans voted for him even though it was clear he had a promiscuous side? Had Clarence Thomas ascended to the highest court in the land as Republican senators with "eyes wide shut" passed him through, with a lifetime appointment?

And isn't "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" actually merely a synonym for "eyes wide shut?" It's a textbook example of looking the other way at something that is plain as day.

Eyes Wide Shut involves sexual revenge and what happens when Dr. Bill Harford undertakes it. Revenge is deemed a necessity,

apparently because of Alice's revelation about a deep (but ultimately harmless) sexual attraction to a sailor. She claims that she would have given up her husband and her daughter for just one fleeting night of passionate sex with him.

This sexual revelation shocks the butt-downed Bill to his core, and he undertakes what amounts to an Orphic odyssey (one of my favorite plot devices, in the 1990s, by the way) into the seamy underbelly of the sex trade in Manhattan.

Out for vengeance, he nearly goes to bed with a sexy prostitute named Domino, ends up exposed to child exploitation in a costume shop with a gorgeous Lolita (Sobieski), and then finds himself at a creepy, vaguely-Satanic orgy for the super-rich at an isolated country estate.

Unfortunately, Bill pays the price for venturing out of his comfortable cocoon and into this dangerous world: his livelihood and family are threatened when he is "outed" at the orgy. Bill escapes the scene intact but learns that there was a price exacted for his sexual curiosity. The friend—a piano player named Nick Nightingale—who told him about the orgy (and provided the password: *fidelio*) has "disappeared," and the beautiful masked woman who rescued him at the orgy has died in what appears to be an arranged "accidental" drug overdose.

Ziegler was also present at the orgy and warns Bill to back off, to leave this be, lest repercussions for Harford and Alice grow worse. Bill acquiesces, but at home, Alice discovers the mask that Bill wore at the orgy, and the truth is out.

Bill's journey to the place, in the words of a super model he encounters, "where the rainbow ends," is one of dangerous duality. And that's a critical point in any understanding of *Eyes Wide Shut*. Kubrick is delving here into the duality of "fantasy" sex: the illusion and the reality of sexual transgressions.

He reveals this duality through a number of devices, not the least of which is the symbol of the "mask." Every character in the film wears one, whether literal or metaphorical. Bill puts on the mask of "Dr. Bill" and flashes his New York Medical Board Identification Card as though he is an F.B.I. agent investigating a case.

Whenever Bill needs access to a world far from his own, whether the costume shop or a hotel, he flashes that card and puts on the air of objectivity and distance we have come to expect from doctors—a level of dispassion. We see it when he is with Ziegler too, an almost glacial nonemotionality.

Underneath—below the mask—Bill is passionate in the sense that he is "aroused" by Alice's revelation of sexual desire for the sailor. Repeatedly in the film, Kubrick cuts to black-and-white fantasies—Bill's fantasies—of the sailor making passionate love to his wife while she writhes in passion.

What *Eyes Wide Shut* does not make explicitly clear is whether Bill's arousal is one of "anger," sexual stimulation, "discovery" or all three. When Alice late in the film relates to Bill a nightmare about being "naked" in a "garden" with him we begin to understand that this is, in a sense, an Adam and Eve story. Bill has been shaken loose from his unquestioning paradise (his belief that his wife is not a sexual creature, driven by sexual desires) and his odyssey is one of "reality," of being thrown out of the Garden of Eden.

Bill is not the only one who wears a mask in the film. Alice wears a mask too. Her mask is one of female propriety. She is a mother of a child, wife of a respected doctor and a professional woman. The mask of propriety—of respectability, one might claim—is shaken loose by her use of marijuana. In a splendid, lengthy dialogue scene with Bill, all of Alice's guilt and anger are released in a tidal wave of raw, emotional bluntness. She's cruel to Bill, deliberately so.

What she reveals is that her sexual desire is as "real" as any man's. That, contrary to popular myth, a woman can harbor sexual fantasies about fucking strangers too. Alice wants to hurt Bill, and that's why she tells him the story about the sailor, but like so many people in this repressed country, she is also deeply conflicted about sex. She has a nightmare in which she participates in an orgy and is quite upset by it. She is unaware that her "dream"—and remember this is, per the tale's original title, a "Dream Story"—echoes Bill's waking odyssey.

Other characters in the drama also wear masks to hide what they don't want to see or others to see. Nick plays piano at the orgy ... with a blindfold on. Ziegler wears the mask of upright citizen and morally fit member of society when, in fact, even during his Christmas party he is upstairs fucking hookers. The men and women at the orgy all wear masks too: to hide their faces and indulge in their darkest and deepest sexual desires, unrepressed by moral code.

A mask reveals one face and hides another— but which is the true face? Every major character in *Eyes Wide Shut* boasts this duality: this Januslike quality of seeming to be one thing but actually being something quite different.

Kubrick utilizes other tools besides masks to express this quality of duality as well. Sexual adventure, for lack of a better term, is itself

a twoedged sword. On the one hand, sex with a stranger promises tantalizing pleasure but on the other hand can be dangerous.

In the case of pretty Domino, whom Bill nearly sleeps with, she tests HIV positive.

In the case of Milich's underage daughter, intercourse is actually not merely wrong but illegal, and therefore holds the threat of police intervention.

In the case of the strange and disturbing orgy, Bill's participation at the event almost threatens everything he holds dear, from his career to his relationship with his wife. "Fidelio" is the password (fidelity) at the orgy, and it is also, in a sense, Bill's constant reminder—even in the midst of his "arousal" over Alice's revelation—not to stray too far into the unknown.

The surface appearance of Domino, the Milich daughter and the orgy are not the whole truths. There is the troubling "underneath." Just scrape the surface a little and it is there.

Alice gives Bill the "apple" and throws him out of marital paradise, so it is appropriate that much of *Eyes Wide Shut* is about Bill's dawning sexual awareness of self. It is highly unusual that virtually every major character in the film relates to Bill on a sexual level.

He goes to visit Marion, a patient whose father has just died, and she makes a pass at him.

He walks down a Manhattan street alone at night and is gay-bashed by a group of drunk blue collar guys who make specific reference about having anal sex with him.

Later, he is propositioned by a prostitute, but it is clear that Domino doesn't merely view Bill as "a John" or "business." She invites him back to her apartment for goodness' sake. How many street walkers want a client to have that level of familiarity? She imagines pleasures with him, it is clear, and is disappointed when he is called away.

Milich's daughter also relates to Bill sexually, whispering something naughty (and unheard by the audience) in his ear.

Even in situations which are clearly not sexual, Bill is treated as a sexual object. For instance, when he goes to a hotel to inquire about Nick's disappearance, the gay hotel clerk (Alan Cumming) comes on to him.

I believe that these events—basically everyone wanting to have sex with Bill—represent Kubrick's attempts to demonstrate the

absolute availability of sexual encounters in 1990s America, if Bill should care to pursue them. He does not pursue any, however, and why he does not, I believe, is one of the issues raised (obliquely) by the film.

Kubrick further stresses duality by walking the line between dreams and reality. Alice has a dream about being at an orgy and Bill attends an orgy in waking. Alice reveals her sexual fantasy of being with that sailor, and that "dream" almost instantly becomes a sort of running stag film in Bill's mind. Bill wants to feel sexual temptation like Alice felt, and suddenly everyone and their brother and sister is coming onto him. Is this real? Imagined? Fantasy? Ego?

Finally, there's no good way to parse the disturbing and even frightening orgy sequence—which plays out as some kind of arcane religious ritual—as anything but Bill's mind reclaiming power over his id before he is resigned to eternal damnation. The orgy is a dark place, a warning to his mind to go back (to not have sex with Domino or Marion) lest he lose that which he values, his marriage.

Again, the literal and metaphorical gateway is that word *fidelio*. Fidelity is what restores him. Yes, the orgy represents temptation, but it is also so sinister that his presence there and the repercussions of his presence snap him back to reality and to his priorities, which in this case involve protecting his family.

Much of *Eyes Wide Shut* also utilizes the metaphor of physical nudity to express the idea of being emotionally naked or emotionally exposed. Alice experiences a nightmare in which she is naked and it disturbs her. The first shot of the film is a rear view of Alice completely nude but her back remains to the camera, meaning we don't have access to her face, and thus what she is thinking. Later, when we do see her face, it is in a mirror (again with the duality), and I interpret her expression (as Bill attempts to kiss her) as one of either disappointment or boredom.

By contrast, Bill also steadfastly refuses to be "naked" in the film, always wearing that physician's mask of dispassion and distance. He is told, at one point during the orgy, to "remove his clothes" or it will be "done" for him. That's the narrative drive of the film expressed in a simple thought: Bill coming at last in touch with his emotions and drive (and sexuality) and not hiding it, not burying it under layers of professional propriety.

The catharsis in the film occurs when Alice confronts Bill—literally—with his mask. She lays out the mask before him and he bursts into helpless tears, with no choice remaining but to confront the truth—about sexual temptation, about his sexual odyssey—

everything.

Indeed, one might read the film in this way: It's the story of a woman very unhappily married to a passionless man who just "cruises" (pun intended) through life, never really feeling much. A European stranger, a man of Hungarian accent who could very well be Dracula (and who represents foreign eroticism), attempts to seduce his wife, and the husband is not roused to jealousy. He does nothing. Feels nothing.

Angry at the lack of passion, the lack of jealousy, this woman reveals a story that challenges the husband's very manhood. In response, the sexual impulse in the husband (Bill) is re-awakened. After several attempts to channel it (with prostitutes, at an orgy), he "morally" comes home to wife and, as the final scene suggests, finally — in Alice's terms—"fucks" his wife.

It was apparently a long time coming.

Read in this manner, the film is a defense of marriage or monogamy. All sorts of obstacles and temptations are put before a married couple (super models, orgies, prostitutes, Lolitas, and vampiric-seeming men with European accents), but the couple ends up together, relieving the sexual tension with one another in a "healthy" and "safe" coupling.

Is all that we see or seem but a dream within a dream? Is there some reason to believe that *Eyes Wide Shut* (a title which suggests REM sleep or dreaming) is but a phantasm of slumber? The film could be read that way too. If this odyssey is Bill's dream, his sexual fantasy, then that certainly explains why everybody comes on to him. We're all the heroes of our own sexual fantasies, aren't we?

To express the subtextual idea that this is a dream world, Kubrick puts up almost subliminal messages as clues to the audience. When Bill meets Domino the streetwalker, behind him two words are seen in neon: EROS and HOTEL— both of which seem to be leading him one way (to a tryst).

In Domino's apartment, a book title is obvious. More accurately, its placement is obvious so we can read it: *Introducing Sociology*. Sociology, of course, is the study of human interaction, and that's the name of the game in this film ... the most intimate of human interactions.

Finally, after Bill escapes the dangerous orgy, he reads a newspaper and the headline blares, not coincidentally: LUCKY TO BE ALIVE!

I suggest that given Kubrick's obsessive methodology in creating

a film and composing shots (deciding what is seen in each and every frame of his work), none of this can possibly be accidental or coincidental. Ditto the napkin—in full insert shot—that reads, importantly "fidelio."

Eros (love), Sociology (human interaction). Sex and Danger: Lucky to be Alive (in the age of AIDS), and fidelio (faithful to a spouse). These are core components of the film, no?

Eyes Wide Shut is a cold, deliberate, hypnotic film, like many of Kubrick's ventures. But it is visually and intellectually haunting.

And yes, it exists in the horror genre. The primary narrative (with so many gaps in logic) when coupled with the symbolic imagery creates a kind of half-rational, half-recognizable dream or nightmare world.

A minimalist score (a haunting, repetitive piano) underscores the horror, and occasionally Kubrick makes us stare right into the heart of darkness when he provides first-person subjective shots of the masked denizens at that creepy, creepy orgy. These people look like monsters, like vultures, as they stare blankly at the camera (and thus us). They are the id let loose, the ugliness of desire run rampant, without restraint or morality.

And also, there's something deeply upsetting about the ideas underlining the orgy, too: the notion of the super-rich feeding upon the lower classes, using their very bodies for pleasures that seem less than wholesome. When this secret conspiracy is discovered, it puts the screws to Bill, willing and able to ruin his life and the life of his family. *Film Quarterly's* Tim Kreider picked up on this plot strand, particularly:

The real pornography in this film is in its lingering, overlit depiction of the shameless, naked wealth of end-of-the-millennium Manhattan, and of the obscene effect of that wealth on the human soul, and on society.⁷⁵

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation (1994) and *Blade* (1998) got at this notion too: the idea of extreme wealth paving the way of eccentricities and then, atrocities.

Though obsessed with realism in terms of lighting and set design, Kubrick comes from a period in film history when directors could be more expressive, more artificial and less naturalistic. I suspect this is why modern audiences may not take to the film easily.

It seems slow to us because it consists of long, elaborate shots

that chart space (think of those hotel corridors in *The Shining*, and you know what I mean). Characters dreamily repeat themselves many times in the film, speaking in a kind of sing-songy, rote fashion. I see all of this as integral parts of the film's lyrical, trance-like mood, but it is not technically realistic. But this is art, not reality television.

Unfortunately, the tide of history is against Kubrick and this film tradition. Quick, fragmentary editing has replaced long shots that chart a film's inner space and geography. Given the film's relationship to dreaming (with eyes wide open), Kubrick has selected the correct mode, if not a popular one. Film can be like a dream or a nightmare, and we risk sacrificing subtext and symbolism if everything we see must be accepted as "literal" truth.

Eyes Wide Shut could be a "dream story," a sexual fantasy, a passion play defending marriage, a story about the double edged sword of sexual encounters (tantalizing *and* dangerous), or an Orpheus-like tale of a hero reclaiming his bride after traveling to a Stygian underworld.

Or perhaps, by contrast, it is a sexual Garden of Eden story, about a man pushed out of marital bliss by "knowledge" of his wife's fantasies. In the end, what you take away is not important. Kubrick has offered a rich, complex film about which we can speculate and interpret so much. He has done the work of the artist. He has "created" something sexy and more than a little scary. Now you decide how it makes you feel.

The Fear: Halloween Night 1/2 (DTV)

Cast and Crew

CAST: Gordon Currie (Mike Hawthorne); Stacy Grant (Peg); Phillip Rhys (Mitch); Myc Agnew (Chris); Kelly Benson (Lisa Anne); Brendan Beiser (Ned); Rachel Hayward (Trish); Emmanuelle Vaugier (Jennifer); Larry Pennell (Grandfather); John Fedele (Morty); Betsy Palmer (Mams); Garvin Cross (Stephen); Byron Chief Moon (Crow); Ingrid Tesch (Louise); Riley Newport (Little Mike); Judy Thompson (Crash Site Girl).

CREW: A Ubiquitous Productions Production, an H. Sims Presentation of a Film by Chris Angel. *Casting:* Blair Law. *Music:* Robert O Ragland. *Costume Designer:* Pearl Bellesen. *Executive Producer:*

Greg H. Sims. *Visual Effects*: Digital Revolution. *Production Designer*: Walter Ockley. *Film Editors*: Adam Coleite, Chris Angel. *Director of Photography*: Brian Pearson. *Written by*: Kevin Richards. *Produced by*: Clin Lien, Mary Beth Jenner. *Directed by*: Chris Angel. *MPAA Rating*: R. *Running time*: 95 minutes.

INCANTATION: "You haven't had any fun since Reagan was governor."—Grandma (Betsy Palmer) chastises her husband in *The Fear: Halloween Night*

SYNOPSIS: Mike Hawthorne (Currie) takes a group of his friends, including his girlfriend, Peg (Grant), to visit his grandparents (Palmer, Pennell) in a remote cabin in Hackett Township on the Eve of Halloween. There, he plans to involve everyone in a Native American ritual that will purge them of their worst fears. The ritual involves a wooden, life-sized doll called Morty (Fedele). But Morty is alive, evil, and waiting to exploit everybody's phobias. In particular, he wishes to worsen Mike's fear that he is actually a nascent serial killer, just like his infamous father.

COMMENTARY: This sub-par sequel to *The Fear* (1995) stands as an object lesson in the importance of competent editing. A horror film of the supernatural variety must establish its heightened reality with every arrow in its quiver: visual composition, performance, storyline, and film editing among them. *The Fear: Halloween Night* is competent if uninspired in several of these key categories, but absolutely negligent in terms of cutting.

Specifically, the film rises and falls on its specter of evil, the wooden doll and boogeyman called Morty. In the original film, Morty was a lithe creation, a horrific near-human doll that, even when seen at rest, was convincing as a doll and as a monster. He was an unmoving sentinel who could burst to life at any point. And in that wait for him to do so lurked anxiety, uncertainty and ambiguity.

In the sequel, Morty no longer resembles a doll. Instead, he is clearly a thick, heavysset man in a costume who never once truly resembles an inanimate object. This alteration reduces Morty's terror

quite a bit. Even Morty's previously unexpressive face has been twisted into a more sinister expression, which, again, changes the essence of Morty's character and power as a horror movie villain. Morty is only supposed to "come to life" when charged with the fears of those near him, and in the original film he wasn't even really evil. That's different here too: he's a fat, evil-looking man in a rubbery suit who kills people with his own two hands.

That's disappointing, but not a movie-killer. What utterly destroys the "reality" of the film and the reality of Morty too is the fact that at least two critical scenes are shot in such a fashion that when we're watching Morty in close-up, the "doll" blinks.

The first instance is at the fourteen-minute point, when Morty is positioned between two characters talking. In the same sequence, when the editor cuts to reverse angles, Morty's eyes actually change back and forth. In one shot, they're open. In the reverse angle, they're closed. And the movie goes back and forth between these inconsistent shots before cutting to the shot of the doll blinking.

This error repeats at the thirty-three minute point. The supposedly wood-carved doll blinks three times in one scene. Again, this kind of thing just totally destroys the movie's capacity to cast a spell. Either the director insufficiently covered both of these scenes, and the editor had to resort to including the shots of Morty blinking, or the editor should be shot for selecting these realitydestroying moments. Again, Morty isn't supposed to be a human inside a costume, he's supposed to be a creation carved from wood.

Frankly, these moments are so distracting that it's difficult to focus on any other aspect of *The Fear: Halloween Night*, a film which makes *The Fear* retroactively look like a masterpiece by point of comparison. What I can tell you for certain is that there's plenty of *Scream*-style, movieconscious dialogue amongst the hip youngsters ("Thank you, Michael Myers," zings one to another), but even this film's setting is a step down from what came before. In the original, there was that creepy Christmas village; here it's just a house in the woods (and not too far in the woods, either).

Also, it's never explained why Morty just out-and-out attacks people in this sequel. He drowns one girl in a toilet bowl and also throws a man out of the window. That last bit is also poorly edited, to press my point. Morty bursts into a bedroom while a young couple is having sexual intercourse in the missionary position, bumping and grinding away. The man jumps up ... and he's miraculously wearing underwear in the very next shot.

Defensively Materializing Underwear! It's a wonderful new

invention designed specifically for coitus interruptus à la Morty.

Also troubling and reality-shattering is the fact that Morty, like the conveniently-appearing underwear, now teleports at will from one location to another. He materializes and de-materializes whenever he wants, which renders the climax ineffective. The surviving teenagers burn Morty down with a torch ... and, surprise, he doesn't dematerialize away to safety!

And did I mention that Morty has also developed the abilities of Robert Patrick's T-1000 in *T2* (1991)? Here, his wooden arm transforms into a cutting weapon: a tomahawk.

The Fear: Halloween Night is a movie that actually negates the reasons the original film succeeded and is scuttled almost entirely by the terrible editing. In hopes of presenting such future catastrophes, I refer the makers of *The Fear: Halloween Night* to a trenchant line of dialogue from their own production:

"The only way this is going to work is if you guys take this seriously."

***From Dusk Till Dawn 2: Texas Blood Money* * *** **(DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Robert Patrick (Buck); Bruce Campbell (Barry); Danny Trejo (Razor Eddie); Tiffani-Amber Thiessen (Pam); Stacie Bourgeois (Marcy); Duane Whitaker (Luther); Terry Norton (Teri Harper); Bo Hopkins (Sheriff Otis Lawson); James Parks (Deputy McGraw); Muse Watson (C.W.); Raymond Cruz (Jesus); Brett Harrelson (Ray Bob); Maria Checa (Lupe); Joe Virzi (Victor); Kevin Smith (Carlos); Scott Spiegel (Porno Director); Troy Niemans (Male Porno Star); Scott Rogers (Craft Service Boy); James Ryan (Mexican Police Chief); Shaun Arnold (Bank Guard).

CREW: Dimension Films presents a Band Apart/ Los Hooligans Productions. *Casting:* Marcia Shulman. *Music:* Joseph Stanley Williams. *Costume Designer:* Rory Cunningham. *Special Make-up Effects:* Robert Kurtzman, Gregory Nicotero, Howard Berger. *Production Designer:* Filipe Fernandez Del Paso. *Director of Photography:* Philip Lee. *Film Editor:* Bob Murawski. *Co-Producers:* Elizabeth Avellan, Paul Raleigh. *Executive Producers:* Lawrence Bender, Robert Rodriguez, Quentin

Tarantino. *Produced by:* Gianni Numari, Meir Teper, Michael Murphey. *Story by:* Scott Spiegel, Boaz Yakin. *Written by:* Scott Spiegel, Duane Whitaker. *Directed by:* Scott Spiegel. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 82 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A band of low-life criminals in Texas, led by ex-con Buck (Patrick), attempt to collect five million dollars on a heist in Mexico. Unfortunately, one of the partners in crime, Luther (Whitaker), makes an unplanned stop at an out-of-the-way bar called the Titty Twister after his car breaks down on a desert road and runs afoul of a vampire, Razor Eddie (Trejo), who transforms him into a vampire. Now a creature of the night, Luther returns to the El Coyote Motel to turn his posse—including Ray Bob (Harrelson), Jesus (Cruz) and C.W. (Watson)—into vampire bank robbers. The heist goes badly when Mexican police and pursuing Texas sheriff, Otis Lawson (Hopkins), surround the bank, and Luther must finally decide if he should cast his lot with the authorities, or his now-vampiric compadres.

COMMENTARY: *From Dusk Till Dawn 2: Texas Blood Money* looks and sounds a lot like a Tarantino movie, but aping an accomplished, personal sense of directorial legerdemain is not nearly good enough. Instead, this sequel virtually overdoses on gimmicky camera angles, so much so, in fact, that *Texas Blood Money* goes from being inventive to distracting to simply annoying in the timeframe of about half-an-hour. This movie wants your eyes to bleed.

Amidst all the cockeyed views, odd compositions and bloody gore, about the only worthy aspect of the production is Robert Patrick's portrayal of lead character Buck. Patrick never fails to bring a sense of reality to his work, and that's true here as well. But hell, he's up against a lot in this vampire movie. For one thing, the movie gives Patrick almost nothing of interest to do, even though he's the leader of a team of not-too-sharp gangsters.

And the hyper visual presentation proves both pounding and distancing. In *Texas Blood Money*, there's a push-up cam shot (going up and down with a guy doing push-ups), a fang-cam shot (a view from inside the throat of a vampire, looking over the fangs at the world at large), and the *de rigueur* mirrored-sunglasses shot.

For a while, it seems that every other shot is a trick or gag shot.

One desperately wants to remind energetic and boisterous director Spiegel that style is not story; style should be used as punctuation, reserved for especially interesting circumstances, not as the meat and potatoes of a movie's narrative.

To its credit, *From Dusk Till Dawn 2* seems to be fully aware of its approach. Mid-way through the movie, the gangsters wait in a sleazy motel and watch a porno movie on the television. One character notes, "When I care more about the characters, I care more about the fucking."

It's a pure Tarantino-styled scene featuring not very bright characters discussing movie culture. More to the point, the conversation reflects on the production itself. As if Spiegel himself realizes that his movie would be more interesting if it actually, you know, featured interesting characters and good writing. It's clever that he makes the assessment, but sad that he can't apply what he's learned to the film he's making.

From Dusk Till Dawn 2 is a fun movie at points, but also a baffling one. Why does the film open with Bruce Campbell and Tiffani-Amber Thiessen, when they have nothing to do with the plot? They're actually "starring" in a vampire movie on TV ... that's it. And what the hell are vampires doing robbing a bank anyway? And how did Danny Trejo's character survive the events at the Titty Twister in *From Dusk Till Dawn*? Yep. This is the kind of movie where you just don't give a damn about the fucking.

The Haunting *

Critical Reception

"DeBont is not a filmmaker known for character-driven or subtle storytelling, of course. This is the man who hurls cows (*Twister*) and cruise ships (*Speed 2*) at a viewer's head, hoping they'll be impressed. And, in his latest outing, he tries the same approach with things that go bump in the night. It doesn't work. The director's Hill House is a CGI fun house, to be sure, loaded to the rafters with stone griffins that attack and bed frames that seek to impale their inhabitants. But despite all that, none of the showy effects have the power to frighten us. They are too over-the-top and too literal-minded. The men who made this movie forgot one simple rule of horror: It is what we don't know, and what we

cannot see that leaves us quaking in our boots."—Kathi Maio, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, "Getting Back to Basics," December 1999, page 66

"... the sets and effects are so overstated and cartoonish, they work against the development of any real psychological terror; the script makes no sense at all; and the rest of the cast [excluding Taylor] seems weak—Wilson overacts outrageously; Neeson has never seemed such a blank spot."—William Arnold, *The Seattle Post Intelligencer*, "Cartoonish Haunting Is More Laughable Than Scary," July 23, 1999, *What's Happening*, page 25

Cast and Crew

CAST: Liam Neeson (Dr. David Marrow); Bruce Dern (Mr. Dudley); Catherine Zeta Jones (Theo); Owen Wilson (Luke Sanderson); Lili Taylor (Nell); Marion Seldes (Mrs. Dudley); Virginia Madsen (Jane); Michael Cavanaugh (Dr. Malcolm Keough); Tom Irwin (Lou); Charles Gunning (Hugh Crain); M.C. Gainey (Large Man); Hadley Eure (Carolyn Crain); Alix Koromzay (Mary); Todd Field (Todd Hackett).

CREW: Dreamworks Pictures presents a film by Jan De Bont. *CASTING:* Randi Hiller. *Based on* The Haunting of Hill House *by:* Shirley Jackson. *Executive Producer:* Jan De Bont. *Visual Effects Supervisor:* Phil Tippett, Craig Hayes. *Music:* Jerry Goldsmith. *Production Design:* Eugenio Zanetti. *Director of Photography:* Karl Walter Lindenlaub. *Produced by:* Susan Arnold, Donna Arkoff Roth, Colin Wilson. *Written by:* David Self. *Directed by:* Jan De Bont. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 112 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Psychology professor Dr. Marrow (Neeson) gathers three insomniacs at a colossal old mansion, Hill House, to test their "fear" responses. Shy Nell (Taylor), however, feels a strange connection to the house and to the children who once lived there under the thumb of the tyrannical Hugh Crain (Gunning). Before long, Nell, Dr. Marrow, Theo (Zeta Jones) and Luke (Wilson) are imperiled by strange forces in the house, and to save herself and the others, Nell must lead Hugh through a spiritual gateway to the other side.

COMMENTARY: You can't go home again. And sometimes a story, once told, simply can't be improved upon. That's very much the take-away lesson from Jan De Bont's remake of *The Haunting*, an underwhelming film and more than that, a pandering travesty of the CGI Age. Special effects have replaced directorial imagination and digitized creations have replaced canny visuals.



Theo (Catherine Zeta-Jones, left) and Nell (Lili Taylor) wonder if Hill House is haunted in the Jan De Bont remake, *The Haunting* (1999).

When first the audience glimpses Hill House in Robert Wise's original and endlessly chilling *The Haunting* (1963), the imposing old structure is a featureless black obelisk: a jagged silhouette carved out from brooding night sky. Secrets dwell inside Hill House—in the dark, in the night— and yet the director's canny selection of imagery (a shadowed, blackened house with no distinguishable architectural features) purposefully confounds desires to peer inside this monument, to learn about the "unquiet dead" who may yet walk the lonely, vast hallways of this spectral monolith.

In the spirit of this great opening shot, Robert Wise structured his horror film (based on the sterling novel by Shirley Jackson) as a probe into that ultimate unknown beyond the mortal coil, but more than that too, as an ambiguous probe into that unknown.

Never in the film, for instance, was the audience 100 percent certain that it had actually witnessed the supernatural and the ghostly. On the contrary, audience senses were heightened and tweaked by disturbing noises, by the sinisterseeming twist of a doorknob, and

more.

Yet certainty still eluded us, just as certainty about the paranormal eludes human beings in real life.

It is no mistake or coincidence either that the four explorers countenancing the chaotic, uncertain terrain of Hill House were—in the spirit of Hugh Crain's strange edifice itself—a determinedly unconventional group. This was important structurally to the narrative. The sojourners reflected the sojourn.

By his own words, Dr. Markway (Richard Johnson) gave up a "conventional" life and a proper upbringing (courtesy of his upper-crust English family) to prove the existence of the supernatural. Theodora (Claire Bloom) also fit the bill of "unconventional," boasting not only extra-sensory perception, but virtually "out" as a lesbian too. Luke (Russ Tamblyn) was a playboy and would-be millionaire but also a youthful man with burgeoning curiosity and conscience. He was unconventional because he didn't accept as blind faith those things told to him by his rich elders.

Finally, Eleanor or Nell (Julie Harris), a spinster who had a poltergeist experience as a child—but who had never truly left the confines of her home—was the most unconventional of the group. The sheltered, inexperienced woman spent years caring for her invalid mother, and the chance to explore Hill House served as an escape from the drudgery of her day-to-day existence. As viewers of the film, we wondered: is Nell's subconscious somehow causing the noises that bedevil Hill House at night (as it caused the rock storm that fell upon her house in childhood)? Or was Nell hallucinating? Or, worst of all: was she so desperate for attention that she was "pretending" all the experiences with the supernatural?

These idiosyncratic individuals—who blatantly did not conform to the boundaries of society-at-large and who didn't entirely fit the bill of "normal" or "trustworthy"—investigated the home of a 19th century robber baron, Hugh Crain. He too was a kindred spirit: an unconventional person and one who didn't believe in the rules of society. He built his oddball house to reflect those beliefs. For instance, all the doors in Hill House are hung crookedly so that—after a time—they would slam shut, apparently of their own volition. And all the angles inside the house were off-center a bit ... just like the characters in the drama. The house—as Markway reminds the viewer—"does have its oddities."

In such a strange environment—with four such anarchistic individuals in close quarters—the probe into the unknown was thus tainted by the frailties of the individual personalities. We can't rule

out that one or all of the explorers was perpetrating some kind of hoax or simply that someone's imagination has gotten out of control. Consider the moment in which Nell becomes convinced that someone is holding her hand in the dark. She believes it to be Theodora, but when the lights come on Theodora is across the room, in her own bed. Wise's camera never leaves Nell's face during the "event." It stays on Nell in extreme close-up throughout the purported "visitation," and thus we are left to wonder if she is hallucinating, or really countenancing something supernatural. If something were holding and crushing her hand ... why don't we ever see it?

Similarly, on the night of the loud noises at their door, Theodora and Nell never actually see anything abnormal. And importantly, Luke and Markway are elsewhere in the house at the time. They could easily be responsible for the noises. Similarly, anyone could have written Nell's name on the wall. When the film's biggest scare arrives—Mrs. Markway's (Lois Maxwell) sudden appearance from the attic—even it is not ghostly in nature. She became lost in the attic and tried to escape ... stunning Nell.

And finally, Nell's death could be suicide brought on by the fact that the attention seeker was being ostracized from the group, and on and on...

My argument vis-à-vis the original *The Haunting* is this: I believe Hill House is haunted and that the explorers experience paranormal or supernatural events there. However, the film retains an authentic sense of terror because Wise walks the line of ambiguity brilliantly. Nothing supernatural is ever truly seen, and we become perched on the edge of our seats by the things we don't see but which we believe to exist. I'm not making the argument that showing ghosts in horror movies is always less effective than hiding them, only noting that *The Haunting* still scares—45 years after it was made—because it exhibits this spine-tingling sense of uncertainty and ambiguity. We don't know what is making the horrible noise outside the bedroom; we don't know if that is a human face in the sculpture on the wall, or merely a trick of the light. We can't be certain if the door is bending because of a supernatural force or someone leaning on the other side of it. But taken altogether, these events are chilling and add up to something menacing. More so, they are chilling because we never get satisfactory answers about them.



Left to right: Theo (Zeta-Jones), Dr. Marrow (Liam Neeson), Nell (Lili Taylor) and Luke Sanderson (Owen Wilson) confront the evil of Crain in *The Haunting*.

Wise's exquisite camerawork in *The Haunting* generates genuine terror, but notice that the camera truly grows perturbed only when the *dramatis personae* have also grown perturbed or hysterical. Theodora and Nell are worked up to raging terror by the time Wise deploys that prowling, angling camera which circumscribes the perimeter of the bedroom door. We interpret this odd, angled movement as the search by something inimical—on the other side of the door—seeking an entry point. But we see nothing, and the camera's twisted perspective could simply be the perspective of two very frightened women. Similarly, Nell's fainting spell on the veranda coincides with the camera lunge from the high tower, again as though something invisible is approaching ... or attacking. Yet the sudden, alarming camera movement could be interpreted as a reflection of Nell's sudden, dangerous vertigo. Especially if we are to believe she is suicidal (a belief which also plays into the climax and the staircase set piece).

And by the time we see a Hill House door swell and retract (as if breathing by itself), every character—especially Markway—is desperate and fearful. These apparent manifestations of the supernatural could be the manifestations of the characters' out of control hysteria and fear.

One of *The Haunting's* central set-pieces involves Nell and

Markway's ascent up a rickety, vast spiral staircase. The staircase is loose from the wall (again, not a danger that is supernatural in origin). But the quest to reach the top metaphorically reflects the team's overall quest. Markway and his people are climbing the tallest mountain and seeking answers on the summit. But even they cannot reach Heaven for answers about life beyond death. And again, notice that when Nell and Markway do finally achieve the top of the spiral staircase, Nell is frightened out of her mind not by a ghost ... but by another desperate human, Markway's wife. In other words, Nell has reached the pinnacle of Hill House—climbed as far as she can possibly climb—and the terrors/answers she gets are still of the human, not supernatural, variety.

The Haunting succeeds as a great horror movie because enough ambiguity exists in the camerawork, the characters, and in the script to support multiple interpretations. Either the house is haunted, or Nell is a very disturbed individual responsible for the so-called haunting, or all the characters are just "innocent and receptive" to their admittedly creepy environment. These interpretations compete for primacy in *The Haunting*, and that competition results in an incredibly active viewing experience—a high-level of engagement with the material. And that engagement leads to unbearable suspense.

Ambiguity was most definitely not in fashion in 1999 when Jan De Bont re-made *The Haunting*. Therefore, what remained unseen but detected in Wise's classy original film became seen ... and predictable here. Not just seen actually, but dramatized in full-color, in ample lighting, utilizing the latest in state-of-the-art computer generated special effects. Because of this see-it-all approach, the remake leaves itself only one possible interpretation: Hill House is haunted by a malevolent spirit who can re-shape reality to his liking.

You can almost detect how the makers of *The Haunting* (1999) were onto the kernel of something clever in reconceiving the film. They seized on the good idea that Hill House was an outward manifestation or reflection of Hugh Crain's twisted psyche. But they went too far. The filmmakers thus transformed Hill House into a bloated monstrosity with oversized rooms that might resemble a human rib-cage or a bizarre drawing by H.R. Giger more so than a real house. Again, you can understand this approach at the same time that you realize it just doesn't work.

Houses—even haunted houses—aren't hatched or born out of twisted psyches. They are built and constructed plank-by-plank and it is simply impossible to believe that the out-of-proportion, bizarre Hill House of *The Haunting* (1999) was ever built by 19th century hands, using 19th century techniques and plans. Because of the house's

egregious (though inventive) design, the film sacrifices some vital piece of its own verisimilitude.

A house with a Godzilla-sized fireplace? With a hall of mirrors? With a virtual river inside one hallway?

Just because filmmakers can visualize such a thing does not mean that they should visualize such a thing. Especially not as a product of history, of the 19th century.

If we can't believe in the house as a real, tangible place from human history, we don't believe in the story being told there, and the movie automatically fails to suspend our disbelief.

Another bad move in *The Haunting* grants the Crain-spirit seemingly invincible powers over flesh and blood, stone and mortar. The house repetitively grows appendage-like vines out of the walls and entraps human characters in them on a regular basis. Stone gargoyles come to life and attack people in broad daylight. Curtains dance with ghostly apparitions whose shapes we can see, process, and comprehend.

The digital special effects are repeated so often and in such ample light that the "horror" imagery becomes commonplace instead of frightening. A flying gargoyle and ambulatory statue are things you can run and hide from, things you can strike with your fist or with a weapon. Contrast that kind of nemesis with the amorphous, unseen thing perhaps prowling in Wise's original. How could you escape an angry spirit that seemed to exist by its own set of "laws"?

The Haunting remake eschews ambiguity in other ways. We also see and detect here the all-too-human motives of Hill House's ghost, Hugh Crain. He's apparently enslaving all the children he used to exploit in life (just like Kathie Lee Gifford) and this version of Eleanor (Lili Taylor)— a surprise(!) descendant of Crain's second wife— must free the children from his hellish grip. All is made right when Nell and the children ascend to Heaven and Crain passes through the "door of judgment" to Hell itself.

Again, there's nothing like taking uncertainty entirely out of the equation. In the original *Haunting* it wasn't even plain whether one ghost or multiple ghosts (or no ghosts) were at work. The new *Haunting* provides us an "earthly" agenda for a specific ghost (enslavement of the children), a proper Christian fate (punishment for bad deeds) and a reward for the righteous victor in the fight against him.

De Bont's *The Haunting* takes the shivery indeterminism of Wise's classic and shelves it in favor of mind-numbing, imagination-crushing

certitude.

No expense was spared to remake *The Haunting* in 1999, but this is one case where seeing is not believing, and where certainty crushes the mind's capacity to imagine the unseen. That's why the original *The Haunting* still "walks alone" as a classic.

This remake, in every sense of the word, is un—"Wise."

The House on Haunted Hill * * *

Critical Reception

"*House on Haunted Hill* links itself to the 1958 William Castle original by building on a firm foundation of cheese. But the new version, directed by William Malone ('Creature,' 'Scared to Death'), is much more pungent—not in terms of quality, necessarily, but definitely in terms of bodily secretions and decay. It's also much more intense.... And OK, this 'House' is also full of the usual clichéd silliness, but there are enough surprises to make it surprisingly, oh, not very bad. (How's that for an advertising blurb?)"—Al Brumley, *The Dallas Morning News*, November 1, 1999

Cast and Crew

CAST: Geoffrey Rush (Stephen H. Price); Famke Janssen (Evelyn Price); Taye Diggs (Eddie); Ali Larter (Sara); Bridgette Wilson (Melissa); Jeffrey Combs (D. Vannacutt); Max Perlich (Schater); James Marsters (Cameraman); Lisa Loeb (Reporter); Peter Gallagher (Blackhorn); Chris Kattan (Pritechett); Peter Graves (Himself).

CREW: Warner Bros. and Dark Castle Entertainment present a William Marlowe Film. *CASTING:* Lora Kennedy. *COSTUME DESIGNER:* Ha Nguyen. *MUSIC:* Don Adam. *SPECIAL MAKE-UP EFFECTS:* Robert Kurtzman, Gregory Nicotero, Howard Berger. *CO-PRODUCER:* Terry Castle. *FILM EDITOR:* Anthony Adler. *PRODUCTION DESIGNER:* David E. Klassen. *DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:* Rick Bota. *EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS:* Dan Cracchiolo, Steve Richards. *PRODUCED BY:* Gilbert Adler, Robert Zemeckis, Joel Silver. *STORY BY:* Robb White. *SCREENPLAY BY:* Dick Beebe. *DIRECTED BY:* William Marlow. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 93 minutes.



Stephen Price (Geoffrey Rush, standing) discovers his wife, Evelyn (Famke Janssen), tortured by spirits in *The House on Haunted Hill* (1999).

SYNOPSIS: Amusement park tycoon Stephen Price (Rush) and his cheating wife, Evelyn (Janssen), invite strangers to her birthday party, to be held at the mountaintop asylum and hospital once run by the crazed surgeon named Vannacutt (Combs). Oddly, the guest list is changed without Stephen or Evelyn's notice, and every guest has some relation to the dark history of the house on the haunted hill. A long night of terror ensues as the guests are locked in the house and forced to guess whether this is just another Stephen Price amusement or something authentically supernatural. Before long, a conspiracy is uncovered, and a dark, black, devouring spirit makes its presence known.

COMMENTARY: The classic, low-budget but nonetheless revered William Castle 1959 horror film *The House on Haunted Hill* introduced viewers to a spooky haunted house, actually the Ennis Brown House in

Los Angeles.

As the film opened, wealthy and oft-married businessman Frederick Loren (Vincent Price) set up the movie's premise in his voice-over narration. Specifically, he and his (fourth) wife, Annabelle (Carol Ohmart), were throwing a "ghost" party at the haunted house. They invited five guests, who arrived at the house in a caravan of "funeral cars," and then offered them \$10,000 a piece if they could survive twelve hours locked inside the house. The doors and windows were locked and barred. The party favors inside the house? *Loaded pistols ensconced in tiny black coffins.*

As this ghoulish set-up suggests, *House on Haunted Hill's* premise is a study in economy: just a handful of interesting and diverse characters functioning in one location, a mostly empty house.

Yet what made *House on Haunted Hill* so much fun is the central conceit: that—when frightened—people were unsure of what they'd seen and could be manipulated into believing and doing things that seem against their very character. In our society today—a fear-based society if ever there was one—this psychological aspect of the film holds up remarkably well.

The 1950s represented a time in American society wherein psychology was growing popular and broadly acknowledged, especially in the middle class. As a rational movement, psychology was "invading" the culture at all turns and this is especially true of the horror films of the day. *The Bad Seed* (1954) asked viewers to contemplate psychology's nature vs. nurture argument. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) assessed psychology and determined that it could be manipulated to explain away uncomfortable "truths" like alien invaders or ideological witch hunts.

And then there was *The House on Haunted Hill* examining the fear response and the manipulation of fear. Notably, all three of these 1950s films feature a psychiatrist/psychologist and usually in a villainous capacity—perhaps expressing the population's distrust of "shrinks."

Importantly, the game of fear in *House on Haunted Hill* was waged against the background of a bad marriage, namely that of Frederick and Annabelle Loren. Annabelle claimed to fear for her life since Frederick's last two wives died of heart attacks. Contrarily, Frederick was certain Annabelle had already attempted to kill him once (a poisoning).

The ghosts and the guests were just chess pieces to be moved around in this couple's battle for supremacy, domination and survival. Given this depiction of marriage as a competition, the film offered

some exceptionally fine (if cruel) marital banter. My favorite is Annabelle's comment to Frederick, "Darling, the only ghoul in this house is you."

In 1999, the very year of the dreadful *The Haunting* remake, *The House on Haunted Hill* was remade as well. It too features digital effects run amok and surgically removes the original's sense of ambiguity about the existence of ghosts. Yet in the case of *The House on Haunted Hill*, the remake also preserves and augments thematic aspects of the original, creating a good, scary film in the process.

In particular, the remake seizes on the idea of fearsome entertainments being mistaken for real. One of the remake's best scenes involves a photographer (James Marsters) and reporter going up in an elevator with Mr. "Price," the Frederick Loren character of this piece played by Geoffrey Rush, in order to visit his new roller coaster. The elevator malfunctions en route and begins to plummet downward, leading to certain death.

But, of course, *that's* the trick: this elevator is actually Mr. Price's latest roller coaster. The "passengers" have been misdirected, fearing something that isn't really dangerous.

Such games (plus the ghoulish party favors of the original) get a lot of airtime in *The House on Haunted Hill*, asking the audience to reckon what is a put-up job and what is authentically supernatural. "Let the games begin," declares Price on greeting his guests. And amongst the rules of the party: "you die, you lose."

The game metaphor reaches its zenith with Mr. Price's unpleasant fate. He becomes trapped in a kind of merry-go-round called "The Saturation Chamber" and loses his mind. And then there's Mrs. Price (Jannsen), whose real goal is murder, but she hopes to cloak that goal with all the attendant bells and whistles of what is, essentially, a haunted house amusement park ride.

The House on Haunted Hill perhaps shows us too much, in terms of its depiction of CGI ghosts, and tells us too much as well about the motivation of such ghosts.

But given the overriding game metaphor, and the fact that Mr. Price is a William Castle–esque showman trying to give a cynical audience his money's worth, there's a level on which this all plays pretty well.

The new *House on Haunted Hill* doesn't undercut the original's sense of aesthetic presentation (as De Bont's *Haunting* undercut the subtleties of Wise's) so much as updates it for the 1990s, an era of new special effects wizardry, a time of "throw everything at the camera

and see what sticks." If Castle could have shown ghosts like those featured in the film, there's little doubt he would have.

The first time I saw the new *House on Haunted Hill*, I outright hated it. It wasn't until a second viewing, right after a viewing of the original, that I began to detect how the filmmakers here had stayed true, in spirit, to the 1950s original. That doesn't mean the new film doesn't misstep. It does. Kattan, for one, is way over the top. However, *The House on Haunted Hill* is one case in which the often-made argument for movie as roller-coaster ride actually holds.

That's the movie's central conceit : horror movie as amusement park ride, and on that level alone the remake works. It generates thrills and chills, and plays on that subconscious fear "what if something went wrong while I was in this haunted house," or "riding this rollercoaster"? The movie plays with what's fiction, what's a lie, and what's " *Terrifying and True*" (the name of the tabloid TV program that appears in the film).

Perhaps *The House on Haunted Hill* doesn't play deeply with that premise, but when the movie's over, you still want to get in line and experience it again, to see if the thrill holds.

In Dreams * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Annette Bening (Claire Cooper); Aidan Quinn (Paul Cooper); Stephen Rea (Dr. Silverman); Robert Downey, Jr. (Vivian); Paul Guilfoyle (Detective Jack Kay); Dennis Boutsikaris (Dr. Stephens); Krystal Benn (Ruby); Lonnie Farmer (Nurse Russo); Margo Martindale (Nurse Floyd); Pamela Payton-Wright (Ethel); Katie Sagoner (Rebecca); Geoff Wigdor (Vivian as Teen); Prudence Wright-Holmes (Mary).

CREW: Dreamworks Pictures Presents a Neil Jordan Film, a Stephen Woolley production. *Casting:* Janet Hirshenson, Jane Jenkins. *Music:* Eliot Goldenthal. *Costume Designer:* Jeffrey Kurland. *Film Editor:* Tony Lawson. *Production Designer:* Nigel Phelps. *Director of Photography:* Darius Khondji. *Based on the novel Doll's Eyes by:* Bari Wood. *Co-Producer:* Redmond Morris. *Produced by:* Stephen Woolley. *Written by:* Bruce Robinson, Neil Jordan. *Directed by:* Neil Jordan. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A woman, Claire (Benning), experiences visions of a young girl being abducted by a killer in an apple orchard, unaware that it is her daughter, Rebecca (Sagoner), who is endangered. After Rebecca turns up dead in a local reservoir and the killer (Downey Jr.) continues to stalk children, Claire explores her psychic connection to the maniac and experiences visions of his activities and past. The key to finding him may involve the long-ago flooded town of Northfield.

COMMENTARY: Neil Jordan's *In Dreams* is beautiful but utterly vacuous. The film's incoherent, derivative narrative involves a mother who has lost her beloved daughter to a psychotic serial killer, and who has developed a strange psychic bond with that same anti-social monster. It's familiar thematic terrain that was thoroughly, endlessly mined in the 1990s in films such as *Fear* (1990), *Hideaway* (1995) and TV series such as *Millennium*. So the story, down to the inclusion of a murdered child, is very much a case of beenthere, seen-that.

But goodness, *In Dreams* is gorgeous to look at.

Bening's Claire is an illustrator of children's books, and her terrifying dreams of death and madness look like the visions from just such a book, a Grimm fairy tale. Much is made of the script's Snow White connections too. Claire's daughter disappears following a school play of Snow White, and apples (as in the witch's poison apple) play a crucial, bizarre role in the proceeding.

And it's great how the visuals mirror the movie's content, how the killer Vivian's childhood was "drowned" in a town that was also drowned, and so on. Or how Claire's red dress and red lips also seem to evoke the red ripe apples of Snow White.

However, the usually-great Robert Downey, Jr., plays the serial killer, Vivian, as a distinctly unthreatening (if bizarre) effete, and the screenplay doesn't make a whole lot of sense. It's difficult to understand what the characters want, what they are muttering about, and how all of the elements of the story are interconnected.

For instance, Claire experiences a vision of her husband dying in a specific hotel room, right down to the number of said room. Well, don't you know, her husband goes missing and nobody notices. He's been defined by the screenplay as an extremely busy airline pilot, always on the job, but then he goes missing for days and the airline

never checks on him. And Claire doesn't check out that room, either, where she psychically witnessed his death.

In Dreams features a great color palette—lime green and deep red—and it looks like a really great movie. The settings, from an underwater town, to a ghostly (though strangely functional) apple orchard and factory, are positively amazing.

In Dreams looks every bit like the equal of *Se7en* or *Silence of the Lambs*.

But looks can be deceiving.

Knocking on Death's Door * * (DTV)

Cast and Crew

CAST: David Carradine (Doc Hadley); Brian Bloom (Brad Gallagher); Kimberly Rowe (Danielle Gallagher); John Doe (Professor Ballard); Brian Glanney (Samuel Jr.); Caroline Rothwell (Bonnie Laurence); Stella Fechilly (Elizabeth); Freda Hand (Harriet); Richard Farrel (Priest); Stuart Dunne (Judd). Brendan Costello (Fred Olsen); Bill Hickey (Town Sheriff); Phillip Sweeney (Patrol Man).

CREW: New Concorde presents a film by Mitch Marcus. *Castings:* Jan Glaser, Jerry L. Whitworth. *Music by:* Michael Portis. *Production Designer:* Ian Bailie. *Film Editor:* Daniel H. Holland. *Director of Photography:* Harry Box. *Co-Producer:* John Brady. *Executive Producer:* Roger Corman. *Written by:* Craig Nevius. *Produced by:* Mary Ann Fisher. *Directed by:* Mitch Marcus. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 83 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On their wedding day, scientist Brad Gallagher (Bloom) and psychic Danielle (Rowe) are assigned by their professor to investigate a haunted house in the village of Birdsong. Strange events begin to occur in the house, events that put a strain on the newlyweds. Meanwhile, the town doctor, Hadley (Carradine), offers a helping hand.

COMMENTARY: Not as mind-numbingly awful as some Roger Corman-produced movies of the 1990s, *Knocking on Death's Door* tells the story of not just any haunted house, but a house where demon screams "come straight from Hell."

Or so says one local. But he's just exaggerating.

The truth is somewhat different. The truth is that the dead inside that house want justice, and that it's a living man, a professional, who has behaved, if not devilishly, at least badly.

At a house built in 1905 that they purchased for \$85,000, newlyweds Brad and Danielle find that their emotions seem to inflame the restless spirit residing there. Driven to anger at one point, the ghost— *possibly of an autistic boy named Samuel*— flings Brad's computer across the room.

As the computer whizzes by, on the soundtrack the film plays the ubiquitous AOL "You've Got Mail!" announcement and then, amusingly, "File's done!"

If this moment doesn't generate in you some serious late-1990s déjà vu, nothing will.

Meanwhile, the script by Craig Nevius attempts to misdirect audience attention with a lecherous professor, when in fact it's nice Doc Hadley, David Carradine, who is the evildoer. Turns out he was dating Samuel's mom and murdered the boy. Finally, the ghost of the boy, Sam, gets vengeance and is assumed into Heaven by the spectral presence of his mom. Argumentative researchers Brad and Danielle have their own baby and name him Sam in honor of the ghost who comes to save their lives.

Part of the 1999 supernatural pack, which included *The Haunting*, *House on Haunted Hill*, *The Sixth Sense*, and *Stir of Echoes*, among others, the undistinguished *Knocking on Death's Door* won't knock anyone out. It's a competently made but thoroughly routine haunted-house thriller. Few scares are to be found here, and the performances vacillate from appealing (Rowe) to strange and off-putting (Bloom).

I've never encountered a single blogger, film scholar, horror fan or movie buff that remembers or likes this movie. It's perfect middle-of-the-night movie watching: mediocre but not dreadful.

... *Knocking on Obscurity's Door*.

Lake Placid * *1/2

Critical Reception

"*Lake Placid's* great strength—oscillating smoothly between horror and comedy—is ultimately its weakness, too. It could be more scary and the ecological sympathy afforded the croc feels self-conscious and bathetic. Even so, *Lake Placid* is thoroughly entertaining. A horror flick that doesn't require you to check your brain and sense of humour at the ticket counter."—Richard Jinman, *Sydney Morning Herald*, "Bite Me," October 29, 1999

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bill Pullman (Jack Wells); Bridget Fonda (Kelly Scott); Oliver Platt (Hector Cyr); Brendan Gleeson (Sheriff Hank); Betty White (Mrs. Bickerman); Meredith Salenger (Deputy Sharon Gale); Mariska Hargitay (Myra); Adam Arkin.

CREW: 20th Century-Fox and Phoenix Pictures, Fox 2000 Pictures presents a Rocking Chair Production, a Steve Miner Film. *Casting:* Lisa Beach. *Creature Effects:* Stan Winston. *Music:* John Ottman. *Film Editors:* Marshall Harvey, Paul Hirsch. *Production Designer:* John Willett. *Director of Photography:* Daryn Okada. *Executive Producer:* Peter Bogart. *Produced by:* David E. Kelley, Michael Pressman. *Written by:* David E. Kelley. *Directed by:* Stephen Miner. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 87 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A ditzzy paleontologist, Kelly (Fonda), is sent to Maine to investigate the murder of a Fish and Wildlife diver at Lake Placid. The culprit is believed to be a prehistoric-sized crocodile. Once in Maine, Kelly teams up with the crusty town sheriff (Gleeson) and Jack Wells (Pullman) to hunt the crocodile. Also on the team is an eccentric crocodile researcher, Hector (Platt). The group hopes to capture the croc, but when it brings down a helicopter, it looks like they might have to kill the ravenous beast.

COMMENTARY: One of the most popular TV series of the late 1990s was a David E. Kelley series entitled *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002), which followed the adventures of a young female lawyer, anorexic-looking Calista Flockhart, at a Boston law firm.

Ally had a penchant for very short miniskirts, quirky legal cases, and making moon-eyes at a married man, played by Gil Bellows, whom she had sort of, well, stalked into the practice based on a romanticized childhood relationship.

Occasionally, Ally's biological clock would manifest itself physically as the mirage of a dancing baby.

Ally McBeal was outrageous, often funny and much decorated, gleaming Emmy, Peabody and Golden Globe Awards during its generally high-rated five-year run.

It was also a controversial series, one that gazed at professional women in the workplace and often portrayed them as neurotic, fantasy-driven goofballs more interested in winning men's hearts and wallets than seeing to their careers, or living life on their own terms.

In 1998, *Time* magazine featured Flockhart's *McBeal* on its cover along with the headline, "Is Feminism Dead?" For all its entertainment value, *Ally McBeal* inarguably portrayed its lead character as a sex-obsessed, daydreaming, judgmental idiot woman-child.

While *Ally McBeal's* capricious heroine likely set back the cause of feminism in pop culture, characters in the horror genre like Gillian Anderson's Dana Scully on *The X-Files* and Sarah Michelle Gellar's Buffy Summers on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* were actively blazing new and positive trails.

Not only were they heroes, but they were realistic human beings grappling with issues such as grief, responsibility, parenthood, religious faith, cancer, and, of course, monsters from Hell/Outer space. And, in some sense, both characters (especially Buffy) were built on the genetic DNA of the horror film archetype the Final Girl, almost universally a character of insight and smarts who always has what it takes to survive a crisis ... and encounters with Jason Voorhees.

Given this history, it's a little unnerving to see the *Ally McBeal* aesthetic transferred kit and caboodle to the horror monster movie, *Lake Placid*. Written by David E. Kelley, the film gives audiences Bridget Fonda as, literally, Ally McBeal in the wild. She's down-in-the-mouth about her break-up with a cad (played by Alan Arkin), and on

a job assignment, though what she's really interested in, like Ally, is finding a good man to take care of her.

Fonda's character, Kelly Scott, is also a complaining neurotic. She doesn't like mosquitoes. She doesn't like sleeping in tents. She compares the local men to the hillbillies in *Deliverance* (1972). A product of late 1990s technology, leisure and comfort, she is the absolute last person you would want to have a on a crocodile hunt with you.

Lake Placid's other characters also seem to have escaped from *Ally McBeal*, particularly Betty White's Mrs. Bickerman. She's raising a crocodile out on the wild, feeding it live cows, and apparently suffers from dementia in an early variation on Denny Crane's "mad cow," perhaps. The problem with these quirky and colorful characters is that they are all quirky and colorful in exactly the same fashion: David E. Kelley TV series fashion.



Left to right, the cast of *Lake Placid*: Bill Pullman, Bridget Fonda, Brendan Gleeson and Oliver Platt.

Steve Miner is a competent director responsible for such 1990s fare as *Warlock* (1991) and *Halloween: H20* (1998). He does what he can with *Lake Placid* to fashion a believable horror movie about a maverick crocodile, even though all the characters suffer from terminal cases of Ally McBeal syndrome. The movie's most unique and interesting character is Hector, played by Oliver Platt, an intellectual and hedonist who believes that the crocodile is actually "Godly."

Lake Placid is visually ingenious at times, and this is welcome. The movie's fun opening shot starts with an aerial view of a lake and trees, and then spirals straight down into the drink—the lake itself—before moving underwater. Then follows a very gory attack scene during which the crocodile bites a man in half. At this point, one hopes the movie is going to be a lake-bound *Jaws*, only with a reptile instead of a great white.

But that's before affluent and indulged Kelly Scott starts whining about every aspect of her wealthy, entitled (but emotionally *unfulfilled*) life.

In line with monster movies of the decade (*Tremors* [1990], *Arachnophobia* [1990], *The Relic* [1997] and *Anaconda* [1997]), *Lake Placid* features a compelling, well-presented monster, and the climax, during which a second creature shows up to dine—is well-played for surprise. There's also a degree of tension in the proceedings as Kelly, the Sheriff and Bill Pullman's ranger character attempt to lure the creature to shore with bait, a live cow dangled by helicopter. "She looks like a giant tea bag," the screenplay amusingly notes.

Lake Placid's final surprise is that the onehundred-and-fifty-year-old crocodile doesn't get killed by our plucky heroes, just captured for further study. Over the end credits, we see the big old critter, a representative of a "keystone species," muzzled and tied down on a flat bed truck, bound for a museum in New York.

These touches all work successfully enough, and *Lake Placid* is mercifully short (barely 80 minutes of story, actually). So, in the final analysis, this is the kind of horror movie you can bring home to Mom.

But not entirely unlike *Ally McBeal*, it occasionally wears out its welcome, what with all the snark and navel-gazing.

The Ninth Gate * * * *

Critical Reception

"The cinematography is lush, with beautiful use of color and effects, such as cameras that track along behind the characters. The film is refreshing because it is subtle and engaging."—R. David Fulcher, *The Movies That Make You Scream*, Authorhouse, 2007

"Polanski managed to turn out an intriguing film that explores themes rarely plumbed in horror movies, such as the seductiveness of evil."—James R. Lewis, *Satanism Today*, ABC-CLIO, 2001, page 194

" *The Ninth Gate* did not do well at the box office, is usually panned by critics and average moviegoers alike, and is considered an inferior horror effort by director Roman Polanski, falling behind notable efforts such as *Rosemary's Baby*. In my first viewing of the film I shared in the popular consensus, but subsequent viewings and reflection revealed that the problem was not with the film but with this viewer. This film requires careful consideration, and a willingness to move beyond more familiar depictions of the figure of Satan as portrayed not as an evil and fallen being in keeping with the Christian tradition. Although the film involves stereotypical representations of Satanists as those who worship the Christian devil, it moves beyond this to include a portrayal of Satan more positively as an entity attempting to bring enlightenment. Beyond the depiction of the satanic figure, *The Ninth Gate* is open to a number of interpretive possibilities that invites repeated viewings. It represents one of Polanski's best horror pieces, indeed, perhaps the best of his cinematic career in any genre."—John W. Morehead, *Theo-Fantastique*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Johnny Depp (Dean Corso); Lena Olin (Liana Telfer); Frank Langella (Boris Balkan); Jack Taylor (Victor Fargas); Jose Lopez Rodero (Pedro); Allen Garfield (Witkin); Emmanuelle Seigner (The Girl); Tony Amoni (Liana's Bodyguard); Willy Holt (Andrew Telfer); Jacques Dacomine (Old Man); Joe Sheridan (Old Man's Son); Jacques Collard (Gruber).

CREW: Lionsgate and Artisan Entertainment Present a Roman Polanski Film, a French-Spanish Co-Production, Orly Films, TF1 Films Production with the Participation of BAC films and Canal and Kino Vision, Origen Producciones, Cinemato Graficas. *Casting:* Howard Feuer. *Music:* Wojeiech Kilar. *Costume Designer:* Anthony Powell. *Film Editor:* Herve de Luze. *Production Designer:* Dean Tavoularis. *Director of Photography:* Darius Khondji. *Executive Producers:* Wolfgang Glattes, Michael Cheyko. Based on the novel *El Club Dumas* by Artur Perez-Reverte. *Written by:* John Brownjohn. *Produced by:* Enriquez Urbizu,

Roman Polanski. *Directed by:* Roman Polanski. *MPAA Rating:* R.
Running time: 133 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A seemingly amoral "collector" of rare books named Dean Corso (Depp) is tasked by a book connoisseur and devil worshipper named Balkan (Langella) with authenticating his volume of an ancient Satanic text. The wife of the former owner, Liana Telfe (Olin), wants the book back because her husband committed suicide after selling it. Corso's hunt for the truth about the book begins to grow dangerous, and he finds himself shadowed by a woman (Seigner) who may be a guardian or an assassin.

COMMENTARY: Near the end of the 1990s, Roman Polanski opened *The Ninth Gate*, a horror genre masterwork that appears, in some deliberate fashion, a hybrid of his two most famous cinematic works: *Chinatown* (1973) and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968).

Like the former, *The Ninth Gate* is a cynical *film noir*, this time concerning a "book detective" named Corso (Johnny Depp) who believes in nothing but his "percentage."

And like the latter, *The Ninth Gate* charts the underlying, supernatural world existing side-by-side with the technological, modern human world. In the case of *The Ninth Gate*, an excavation of an ancient text reputedly written by Lucifer himself (LCF) leads Corso to a final, personal reckoning, an interface with Evil.

In the year of *Deep Blue Sea*, *The Haunting* and other high-tech horrors, *The Ninth Gate* is a welcome anomaly, a restrained affair that depends on plot, characterization, suspense and imagination rather than CGI special effects. Corso is the lynchpin of the proceedings, and in the tradition of films noirs such as *Angel Heart* (1987) or even *Blade Runner* (1982), the journey really concerns him and his destiny.

As the film opens, Corso is a high-paid, intellectual mercenary. His new client, a Satanist named Boris Balkan (Frank Langella), entrusts him with an important case involving a text reputedly written by the Devil because he believes "there is nothing more reliable than a man whose loyalty can be bought for hard cash."

However, Corso's vanity compels him to learn more about the book, to appreciate both the artistry of the evil text and the difficulty

of determining its authenticity. Corso's curiosity and faith in his own abilities increase as he faces down further dangers. This is how the Devil gets him, by appealing to his intellect and his arrogance. With the help of a sexy guardian angel (Emmanuelle Seigner) who may actually be a demon, Corso comes to consider it his destiny to find and open the Ninth Gate, usurping Balkan's desired role.

Corso's journey has made this possible; his survival of dangers and solving of the riddles of Satan's book has appealed to his ego.

Or, at the very least, that's one way of reading *The Ninth Gate*, though Polanski remains evenhanded and enigmatic in exposing the movie's meaning. The authors of *The Cinema of Roman Polanski: Dark Spaces of the World* wrote:

Is this a journey where Corso transforms his persona? Or is it a journey of self-realization? Does he become one of Lucifer's fallen angels or does he discover that he already is one? We can never really know. Though we see Corso enter the Ninth Gate at dusk in a blinding flash of light, we never know if this is the gate of Hell or a mock inversion of the gates of Paradise.⁷⁶

Author Mark Conard solved another piece of the puzzle, suggesting that Corso's true nature rested in the very form that Polanski had selected to dramatize his story: the film noir. Conard wrote:

He is now searching for his own demonic salvation—his otherworldly dark powers. And by film's end he is, indeed, a full-fledged servant of Satan, prepared to do whatever it takes to unlock the Ninth Gate.⁷⁷

By film's end, then, in true noir fashion, Corso has discovered *himself*. He is not an amoral man who believes only in percentage. In believing in himself (in committing the sin of vanity), he has come to have "faith." By solving the great riddles of the book, the Devil has played him. And by sending him a sexual conquest, Seigner's guardian angel, the Devil has closed the deal. The last scene involves Corso attaining his due, both going where no human has gone before ("there have been men disemboweled for what you are about to witness,") and fulfilling his destiny as servant to the Devil.

The question might still be raised, however: was this always Corso's destiny? Was he a demon who forgot who he was (along the lines of Johnny Favorite's amnesia in *Angel Heart*) or just a man who,

through his investigation, came to discover who he really was, what he believed in?

And so we arrive at another big question of human existence. Is Creation of a determinist nature, wherein everything occurs for a reason? Is there an order to the universe, a purpose? And could that purpose be a dark one? Or does Corso have "free will" to choose his path and come to his fate knowingly, with eyes open?

Perhaps this is just a matter of sin and vanity. Corso goes to the Devil, in part, because the Devil is the only entity, perhaps, who has ever surprised the cynical "book detective." *And how did he do that?* By proving His very existence, which Corso heretofore could not believe in, at least not until he had satisfied his intellectual curiosity about him. The Devil understands that for a non-believer, Corso must take "the road that leads to equality with God."

The Devil lays down that road for him, and Corso obligingly, and unknowingly, follows it, impressed by his own ability to navigate it. He thinks he is doing so independently, but he isn't.

While trading in 1990s horror conventions such as the conspiracy (here dramatized by the Order of the Silver Serpent: a secret society of celebrities and millionaire Satanists), *The Ninth Gate* adopts a more classical form, in keeping with the film noir, a format that saw its most successful depiction in the post-war 1940s. There's an icy precision and formality to Polanski's camerawork in *The Ninth Gate*, which, as one critic noted, "recalls the Hitchcockian sense of artificiality."⁷⁸

This is a critical distinction because Polanski means for the audience to assemble the pieces of the story's mystery for itself. But the visualizations themselves—the "sense of artificiality"—go purposefully against the grain of ever-increasing naturalistic, less theatrical, less artificial films of the 1990s.

What this approach seems to indicate is that the world of Corso—the world of man—is a fake skin, hiding the real nature of things. And what is the real nature of things? Well, the world is clearly a place of demons and angels, and of God and the Devil. Man toils in his "artificial" world where the true structure of things can be dismissed. But the formal nature of the film's compositions and the style of the editing suggest that there is something more, that what man considers real is not real.

Leading up to one of the most ambiguous endings in horror movie history, Polanski's *The Ninth Gate* is a work of supreme intelligence and depth, one that uses the greatest aspect of the film noir (the outward investigation leading to a discovery about self) to

suggest a world beyond our perception—a world of real evil.

"Some books are dangerous," suggests a character in *The Ninth Gate*, and so are some horror movies. A careful viewing of *The Ninth Gate* will leave the attentive viewer reeling for days while considering Corso's trajectory. Was it a road he made or a road placed before him?

And what, finally, did Corso find beyond *The Ninth Gate*?

In sending a character down an unknown path into a blinding light of we-know-not-what, Polanski brilliantly tapped into the sense of fear dominating the end of the 1990s. The future wasn't "the bridge to the 21st century," perhaps, as Clinton claimed. On the contrary, many feared, the future was but the gate to apocalypse (Y2K) and man's Biblical downfall.

The Rage: Carrie 2 * *

Critical Reception

"Okay, this movie could have been just awful, and it isn't awful. It's just a kind of drab remake of *Carrie*. Nice to see Amy Irving again."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Emily Bergl (Rachel Lang); Jason London (Jesse Ryan); Dylan Bruno (Mark); J. Smith Cameron (Barbara Lang); John Doe (Boyd); Gordon Clapp (Eric's Father); Rachel Blanchard (Monica); Mena Suvari (Lisa); Clinton Jordan (Sheriff Kelton); Amy Irving (Sue Snell); Steven Ford (Coach Walsh); Zachary Ty Bryan (Eric); Justin Ulrich (Brad); Elijah Craig (Chuck); Kate Skinner (Emily); Charlotte Ayanna (Tracy); Eddie Kay Thomas (Arnie).

CREW: United Artists Pictures Presents a Red Bank Film Production. *Casting:* Gretchen Rennell Court. *Costume Designer:* Theoni Aldredge. *Director of Photography:* Donald Morgan. *Music:* Danny B. Harvey. *Film Editor:* Richard Nord. *Production Designer:* Peter Jamison. *Executive Producer:* Patrick Palmer. *Produced by:* Paul Monash. *Written by:* Rafeil Moreu. *Directed by:* Katt Shea. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 105 minutes.

INCANTATION: "It's perfectly normal to be afraid of turning out like your parents."—Sue Snell (Amy Irving) counsels Rachel Lang (Emily Bergl) in *The Rage: Carrie 2*

SYNOPSIS: A psychically-charged high school student and foster kid, Rachel Lang (Bergl), is devastated when her best friend, Lisa (Suvari), commits suicide after being sexually humiliated by a posse of high school football jocks who score "points" for having intercourse with various girls. A "true romantic," another student named Jesse (London), falls in love with Rachel, even as her powers grow, and as Bates High guidance counselor, Sue Snell (Irving), attempts to prevent her from suffering the same fate as another disturbed teen, Carrie White. As Sue investigates Rachel's life and telekinetic powers, she learns she shares a genetic heritage with Carrie. Meanwhile, the vengeful jocks plan to publicly humiliate Rachel at a party after a big football game.

COMMENTARY: This largely unnecessary sequel to Brian De Palma's masterpiece of teen angst, *Carrie* (1976), suffers from an acute case of schizophrenia.

On one hand, the film powerfully comments on the troubled American teen culture of the 1990s, a culture that included school shootings, and, oddly, on occasion, sex rings. The specific context is a much-publicized event from 1993 involving Lakewood, California's "Spur Posse," a group of jocks who competed with one another for points while "scoring" sexually with female students.

On the other hand, *The Rage: Carrie 2* slavishly follows the narrative outline of the original *Carrie*. Like its template, it features an ostracized girl with a crazy mother, her doomed relationship with a sympathetic jock, her extreme humiliation by callous teens, and, lastly, an explosive public event/celebration in which her incipient telekinetic abilities come to horrifying, violent life.

Only *The Rage's* coda—at first blush a weak echo of De Palma's graveside stinger—succeeds in overcoming the by-the-numbers storytelling approach. Despite all odds, it casts a melancholy spell.

On March 20, 1993, *The New York Times* reported that eight Lakewood high school students, the self-named "Spur Posse" (after the San Antonio Spurs), were being held on accusations of rape, intimidation and molestation. Their victims were girls between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, and one of the rapists was eighteen, thus able to be charged with statutory rape. The Spur Posse gang was believed to have included as many as twenty or thirty local boys. And their crimes were treated by the jock perpetrators as a game:

"The group had a point system and each sexual encounter, the individual scored a point," Lieutenant Sargent said. "It was well known around the school, this point system. It didn't matter whether the girls consented or not. If they consented, it was a point. If they didn't consent, it was a point."⁷⁹

The Rage: Carrie 2 transfers the details of the Spur Posse to Bates High School. There, the football team keeps score in a little black-and-white book as each player "scores" with various girls. Based on difficulty, the jocks get different points. For instance, since Rachel is believed to be a "dyke" at one point, she is "worth" more points than straight girls. Rachel's psychic rage awakens in *The Rage: Carrie 2*, primarily after her friend—a victim of the Bates posse—commits suicide because she was unable to deal with the emotional betrayal of Eric, a jock with whom she had sex.

Besides spelling out the details of these crimes by affluent, white jocks, *Carrie 2* also comments on two other elements of this and other similar sex crimes of the era. The first aspect is the description of the only legal recourse: charging statutory rape if the offender was eighteen or older and the victim under sixteen. To many, this seemed like an inadequate charge given the emotional betrayals, intimidations and physically intrusive nature of the crimes.



Sue Snell (Amy Irving, right) sees something familiar and frightening in the troubled Rachel (Emily Bergl) in the sequel *The Rage: Carrie 2* (1999).

The second aspect of the crime dramatized by *Carrie 2* was the despicable "rallying" of the town around the criminals, not the victims. In the famous Glen Ridge rape case of 1989 and the specific Spur Posse incident of 1993, many parents, and even fellow students, defended the athletes by arguing that "boys will be boys." Bernard Lefkowitz wrote about this aspect of the case in his book *Our Guys*. He related the fear of town residents if they spoke out against the athletes:

Parents are begging their child not to say anything for fear they'll find their house spray painted, or their tires slashed. People are speaking to the press, but anonymously, in order to avoid harassment. And by whom? Teenagers. It's more than frightening, it's absolutely terrifying.⁸⁰

In *The Rage*, Gordon Clapp plays the father of the eighteen-year-old rapist, Eric, and argues that he should not be charged with a crime because the town will lose an upcoming football game. Authorities and school principal acquiesce to his demands.

The Rage: Carrie 2's underlying point seems to be that actions indeed have consequences. After being humiliated by a sex-tape,

Rachel "goes Carrie" at a party and kills the rapists that the authorities would not punish. In turn, she dies at the party, held responsible for her own crimes. The film's coda, set at college a year after Rachel's explosion of anger, finds a lonely, sullen Jesse (London) still thinking of Rachel ... the girl he loved and lost. He looks in the mirror, after a "stay awake" jump involving her sudden appearance in his dorm room, and his eyes are dead. Although he was only a peripheral part of the movie's Spur Posse, Jesse has learned that the game he and others played had deadly consequences. For Lisa. For Eric. And most importantly, for Rachel, the girl he grew to love.



A traumatized counselor Sue Snell A traumatized Rachel (Emil Bergl, right) needs help from guidance counselor Sue Snell (Amy Irving) in *The Rage: Carrie 2*.

Early in the film, *The Rage* draws an explicit parallel between Jesse and Rachel and the literary couple, Romeo and Juliet. Shakespeare's tragedy is contextualized as a romance in the fact that Romeo and Juliet can only be together in "death." The final, contemplative shot of *The Rage: Carrie 2* suggests that there is nothing romantic in death or in loss. The Posse's actions, Lisa's suicide, and Rachel's brutal vengeance were all unnecessary and tragic, a consequence of a callous teen culture and the feeling of entitlement that parents encourage in high school athletes.

In terms of performances, in terms of story, in terms of social value, *The Rage: Carrie 2* deserves some degree of admiration. Yet the

film lacks even an iota of Brian De Palma's style and so slavishly follows the plot-points of its predecessor that it ultimately lacks suspense. Everyone knows how the film is going to end—a repeat of Carrie's telekinetic bloodbath at the prom—and that's exactly what *Carrie 2: The Rage* provides, with little variation.

It would have really been terrific if the film had flouted expectations and seen Rachel control her deadly powers. That would have provided some suspense, but in the end, commercial interests won out. I guess that's not unexpected either.

Give director Katt Shea credit for trying. Shea uses every trick at her disposal, from black-and-white footage, flashbacks of Sissy Spacek in *Carrie*, to weird zooms and tilts, in an attempt to infuse tension and terror into the proceedings, but this aspect of the film just doesn't work. It falls flat because all the plot points from *Carrie* just seem rote by 1999. We all know the story, and it needed to be shaken up a bit.

The film's scares don't work, and some other aspects of the narrative are also baffling. Sue Snell, for instance, warns Rachel that telekinesis is a "genetic," "recessive" trait carried on "the male line," a revelation that leads to the discovery that Rachel is Carrie's half-sister. Of course, in the "real" world, we know no such thing about telekinesis. Sue Snell discusses the paranormal as though it is a common trait like addiction or alcoholism, and, well, that's ridiculous. Furthermore, the film goes off on a sub-plot about Sue releasing Rachel's schizophrenic mother from Arkham Asylum and bringing her to the football party to warn Rachel about her father's true identity.

Then—after all the bells and whistles—Sue Snell gets to the party and is felled instantaneously by a harpoon through the head.

Again, this is an echo of Betty Buckley's character in the De Palma film. There, the kindly gym coach, despite her best intentions, was also killed by Carrie.

But here, the audience has a considerable amount invested in Sue Snell. Not only is she our only personal connection to the legacy of Carrie White, she is the one person who can stop the terror from recurring. To murder this character so off-handedly is certainly powerful in terms of shock effect, but it also makes the rest of the film seem incomplete. All the time we invested in Sue goes exactly nowhere and amounts to nothing.

In terms of dramatizing some historical element of the 1990s, in terms of central performances, and in terms of the haunting ending, *The Rage: Carrie 2* is worthwhile viewing.

As a horror movie and as an original narrative, it is a pale

imitator of a much-superior film.

***Ravenous* * * ***

Cast and Crew

CAST: Guy Pearce (Captain Boyd); Robert Carlyle (F.W. Calhoun); Jeremie Davies (Toffler); Jeffrey Jones (Hart); John Spencer (General Starsen); Stephen Spinella (Knox); Neal McDonough (Reich); David Arquette (Cleaves).

CREW: A Fox 2000 Films/Adam Fields/ Heyday Films Production. *Casting:* Billy Hopkins, Suzanne Smith, Kerry Barden. *Music:* Michael Nyman, Damon Albarn. *Film Editor:* Neil Farrell. *Production Designer:* Brye Perrin. *Director of Photography:* Anthony B. Richmond. *Executive Producer:* Tim Van Rellim. *Produced by:* Adam Fields, David Heyman. *Written by:* Ted Griffin. *Directed by:* Antonia Bird. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 101 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: In the 1840s, a coward, Captain Boyd (Pearce), is inadvertently recognized for his "courage" in the Mexican-American War and transferred to an outpost in California called Fort Spencer, a way station to Nevada. One night, a stranger arrives, sick and dying, but is then nursed back to health. Calhoun (Carlyle) soon tells a hair-raising story of survival in the wilderness and the way that the survivors of his expedition resorted to cannibalism. The men of Fort Spencer mount a rescue expedition for other survivors, only to learn that Calhoun himself is a cannibal. And a hungry one too.

COMMENTARY: *Ravenous* is a bloody horror film about a socially-unacceptable appetite or desire, a biological drive that can't be sated.

And if you think I'm writing about the taboo of cannibalism here, you've got another thing coming.

Consider that *Ravenous* features an all-male cast and features several up-close and personal shots of men literally devouring other men; pressing their lips to them, hungrily biting them ... even licking

them, as one character notes with indignant horror.

The film's dialogue also hints strongly at a homosexual sub-text. "You hunger for it ... you just won't resign yourself to it," states a cannibal, hoping to lure Captain Boyd (Pearce) to his alternate style of living, his unusual taste.

There's also talk of tasting "flesh" and having "felt its power." And also the loneliness of having an appetite that sets you apart from your bunk mates. "It's lonely being a cannibal. It's tough to make friends."

Indeed, so many of the one-liners in *Ravenous* play as sexual, flirtatious come-ons that one might be tempted to blush. One sequence even eerily forecasts *Brokeback Mountain* (2004) with a cannibal stealing by darkest night into the tent of another man, his desire uncontrolled. Soon, he's pressing his lips into another man's ... wound.

Again, it is cannibalism here, not gay sex, but it's tough to deny that *Ravenous* is really about the love that dares not speak its name. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

In the movie's setting, a lonely fort and a place that "thrives on tedium," what will men do to entertain themselves? Eat each other? Fuck each other? That's one of *Ravenous*'s overriding questions, though not its only one. The film opens snarkily with two quotes, one from Nietzsche ("He that fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster") and one from Anonymous ("Eat Me"). After that opening, it lingers on an obsession with bloody, red meat so nauseating that it could turn a meat and potatoes man into a vegetarian.

So perhaps *Ravenous* isn't exclusively about homosexuality, but about human appetites in general: which ones are deemed acceptable and which are not? Which ones can we control, and which ones can control us?

Cleverly, the film even suggests a supernatural cause for Calhoun's cannibalism, that he is, in fact, a creature called a Wendigo. A wendigo is a monster who eats the flesh of another man and steals his strength, his essence and spirit, a monster whose hunger is "insatiable." The more he eats, the more he wants. Again, it's pretty hard not to read this description in two ways, and one suspects that's exactly what *Ravenous* wants from the audience.

After all, cannibalism and gay sex remain two major taboos in Hollywood mainstream films, and so this transgressive film gets to kill two birds with one stone. In the process, it revels in absolutely grotesque scenes of people biting and ripping flesh, and concludes that, maybe— just maybe—breaking rules isn't such a bad thing.

"Morality," the film suggests, "is the last bastion of a coward."

So perhaps *Ravenous* is actually advising its characters to be true to their nature. That's easy for one strong man, Calhoun (the cannibal), not so easy for another, Captain Boyd, an established coward.

Maybe Captain Boyd needs to come out of the cannibal closet and just be who he wants to be. Maybe that's actually the "manifest destiny" described in the film: man's imperative to be what he will, even if it is not accepted by society at large.

Or maybe *Ravenous* is just a really gory horror movie about people who eat people.

(DTV) *Retro Puppet Master* * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Greg Sestero (Young Toulon); Brigitta Dau (Ilsa); Jack Donner (Afzel); Stephan Blackehart (First Servant); Guy Rolfe (Elder Toulon); Robert Radoveanu (Second Servant); Sandu Teodor (Latour).

CREW: Full Moon Pictures Presents a Charles Band Production, a Joseph Tennent Film. *CASTING:* Robert MacDonald, Perry Bullington. *MUSIC:* John Massari. *COSTUME DESIGNER:* Oana Paunescu. *RETRO PUPPETS AND PROSTHETIC EFFECTS DESIGNED AND PRODUCED BY:* Christopher Bergschneider, Jeffrey S. Farley. *SPECIAL VISUAL EFFECTS BY:* John R. Ellis, David Lange, Jerrod Cornish. *FILM EDITOR:* Don Adams. *PRODUCTION DESIGNER:* Radu Corciova. *DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:* Viorci Sergiovici, Jr. *EXECUTIVE PRODUCER:* Charles Band. *ORIGINAL STORY:* Charles Band. *PRODUCED BY:* Vlad Paunescu, Kirk Edward Hansen. *WRITTEN BY:* Benjamin Carr. *DIRECTED BY:* Joseph Tennent.

SYNOPSIS: In 1944, while fleeing from Nazi Germany, Andre Toulon (Rolfe) tells his puppets, Blade, Tunneler, Pinhead, Six-Shooter and Jester, the story of their earlier incarnations. He recounts how, in the early 1900s, servants of Sutekh pursued an old Wizard, Afzel (Donner), from Egypt to Paris. There, Afzel shared the secrets of transferring souls into inanimate objects with a young puppeteer at the Theatre Magique, Toulon (Sestero). Unfortunately, a young Swiss

woman, Ilsa (Dau), became a pawn in the battle, captured by the mummified servants of Sutekh. It was at that point that Toulon transferred the souls of his dead puppeteer friends into early versions of Blade, Six-Shooter and Pinhead, as well as a puppet named Cyclops and another resembling a skeletal surgeon.

COMMENTARY: *The Puppet Master* series returns to the canon with its last entry of the 1990s, the mildly satisfactory *Retro Puppet Master*. Picking up at the end of *Puppet Master 3: Toulon's Revenge*, *Retro Puppet Master* is a prequel that relates young Toulon's first encounter with Sutekh and his introduction to the secret of soul transference. The film also introduces the young puppetmaster to his future wife, though here she is referred to as "Ilsa" instead of as "Elsa," for some reason.

As is the case with *Puppet Master 3*, *Retro Puppet Master* is a slightly better than run-of-the-mill entry in this long-running franchise since it focuses on the most interesting character, Toulon, and fills in some gaps about his long history and involvement in the world of magic. The film thus returns to the story arc of Part 3 through Part 5, offering information about Sutekh and the "war" between good and evil. The dignified Guy Rolfe, who was relegated to cameo status in *Puppet Master 4* and 5 here gets a meatier role, and brings a nice sense of melancholy and bemusement to his book-end appearances here as Toulon. After the (absent) real life puppet master David Allen, Rolfe is the *Puppet Master* franchise's most valuable player.

Retro Puppet Master pits Toulon and his "retro puppets" (early versions of Pinhead, Tunneler, Six Shooter and the others) against three mummy warriors, who adopt human guise as they pursue Afzel. Garbed in black sunglasses and trenchcoats, they in some way seem to reflect the agents from *The Matrix* (1999), but no matter, they make for good villains. As always, the *Puppet Master* movies seem to work best when they pit the puppets against evil forces, not send them on killing sprees against random human characters (as was the case in the atrocious previous entry, *Curse of the Puppet Master*).

As enjoyable as *Retro Puppet Master* is, there remain some baffling touches. Not only is Elsa misnamed in the screenplay and credits, but this movie purports to reveal the origins of the puppet Blade, displaying an earlier, more primitive version of the beloved puppet character. Yet, according to explicit spoken dialogue in *Puppet Master 3: Toulon's Revenge*, Blade was forged as a terrifying puppet reflection of the Nazi officer named Kraus, played by Richard Lynch. Once more, you have to wonder if the powers that be behind the *Puppet Master*

series were paying attention to detail, since this is a pretty major discontinuity.

Still, it's wonderful to see Guy Rolfe play Toulon once more, and even nicer that the filmmakers should go back to the beginning to fill in a "gap" in their saga. *Retro Puppet Master* is no great shakes, but when watched, perhaps in conjunction with *Puppet Master 3: Toulon's Revenge* and *Puppet Master 4: The Demon* it tells part of an impressive horror saga. If you have any interest in catching up with the *Puppet Master* series, but are intimidated by the thought of watching seven so-so entries, the aforementioned three titles would be the ones to see.

LEGACY: *Puppet Master: The Legacy* (2003) was the next entry in Charles Band's enduring puppet saga, though it featured barely thirty minutes of new footage amidst clips of the older films. On July 27, 2010, a new film, *Puppet Master: Axis of Evil*, was released directly to home video, on Blu-Ray and DVD.

Resurrection * * .

Cast and Crew

CAST: Christopher Lambert (John Prudhomme); Robert Joy (Demos); Barbara Tyson (Sara Prudhomme); Rick Fox (Scholfield); Leland Orser (Andy Hollinsworth); David Cronenberg (Father Rousell); Jayne Eastwood (Dolores Kantz);

David Fery (Mr. Braslauer); Jan Filips (Stanley Galloway); Barbara Gordon (Judge Sears); Darren Enkin (David Ordway); Robert Kennedy (Hotel Clerk); James Kidnie (Walter Chibley); Peter MacNeill (Captain Whippley); Craze Thorne (David Elkins); Ray Vernon (Agent Wingate); Philip Williams (Rousch).

CREW: Interlight Pictures Presents in association with Baldwin/Cohen Production, a Russell Mulcahy Film. *Production Designer:* Tim Boyd. *Casting:* Mary Jo Slater. *Music:* James McGrath. *Film Editor:* Gordon McClellan. *Director of Photography:* Jonathan Freeman. *Co-Producers:* Karen Baldwin, Jack Gilardi, Jr. *Executive Producers:* Paul Pompian, Richard Cohen. *Producers:* Howard Baldwin, Christopher Lambert, Patrick Choi, Nile Niami. *Story by:* Christopher Lambert,

Brad Mirman. *Written by:* Brad Mirman. *Directed by:* Russell Mulcahy. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 108 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A surly cop with a tragic past named Prudhomme (Lambert) investigates a serial killer (Joy) in Chicago, one stealing different body parts in a twisted plan to resurrect Jesus Christ come Easter Sunday. The killer retaliates against Prudhomme for his investigation (and for his interruption of the crime), attempting to kill his wife, Sara (Tyson), and hobbling Prudhomme's partner, Hollinsworth (Orser). Prudhomme reluctantly takes assistance from an FBI agent working the case, but there's more to the agent than meets the eye.

COMMENTARY: Russell Mulcahy and Christopher Lambert, the duo behind the fantasy *Highlander* (1986), may seem like an unlikely duo to make a bizarre and somewhat effective serial killer police procedural, yet that's exactly what they've done with *Resurrection*, a stylish and bloody entry in the Hannibal Lecter sweepstakes.

To be certain, all of the various and sundry aspects of the serial killer paradigm are trotted out in *Resurrection*, even well past their expiration dates. You can enumerate these conventions at length, from the pounding, incessant rain of *Se7en*, to the lead detective with a tragic past involving the death of a child, to the message written in blood ("He's coming"), to the wrongheaded superior, to the imperiled partner, to the serial killer with a nickname ("The Numbers Killer"), to the false leads, and even to the bait-and-switch trick (wherein someone is not who they claim to be).

And yet, somehow, this movie skirts the predictable quality of its narrative, largely by virtue of Mulcahy's exquisite mastery of the camera and composition.

On that front, *Resurrection* boasts some effective and jolting camerawork. Oftentimes, the camera will suddenly accelerate to a great velocity, then slow down just as suddenly, a kind of hyper quickening of the movie's pulse, followed by a return to normality.

Furthermore, Mulcahy spares the audience none of the gruesome details. In the course of *Resurrection*, the audience sees a victim lose his bladder as he is being tased, a cop vomit, and much more.

The "Numbers Killer" has a diabolical plan to re-assemble Jesus Christ out of body parts, a kind of Frankenstein Christ, and before the movie is over, you are provided a lingering look at the pieced-together would-be messiah. The movie really reaches a nasty vibe when the killer gets to his last gambit, stealing a baby's heart (born to a mother named Mary, naturally).

Resurrection appropriates the vibe from *Se7en* with its "the world is getting sicker every day" atmosphere, but it still all holds together pretty well. For a movie about a killer stealing body parts to re-assemble Christ (on Easter, no less), it has some nice character touches. For instance, there's a harrowing scene during which the film's hero, Lambert's Prudhomme, returns home to the certainty that the killer has fulfilled a promise to kill his wife. The house, as it turns out, is a blood-bath. At the moment that Prudhomme sees the blood everywhere, you immediately think of his dead son and reflect on the fact that now, without his wife, Prudhomme is all alone.

If the movie didn't work on some level, you wouldn't care about Prudhomme one way or another. This scene works (even though it is undercut by the soon-to-be-revealed facts of the real murder victim), and most of the time, so does *Resurrection*.

Shikoku * * *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Natsukara Yui (Hinako); Tsutsui Michitaka

(Fumiya); Kuriyama Chiyaki (Sayori); Negishi Toshiei (Hiura Teruko); Ohsugi Ren (Hiura Yasutaka); Sato Makotui (Sento Naoro).

CREW: Kadokawa Pictures, in cooperation with the Shikoku Production Group, presents an Asmik-Ace Production. *Executive Producer:* Hara Masato. *Produced by:* Tsuge Yasushi, Nagai Masao. *Based on the novel Shikoku by:* Bando Masako. *Written by:* Manda Kunimi and Sento Takenori. *Director of Photography:* Shinoda Noboru. *Art Director:* Taneda Yohei. *Lighting:* Nakumur Yuki. *Music:* Kadokura Satoshi. *Film Editor:* Okuhara Yoshiuki. *Directed by:* Shunichi Nagasaki. *MPAA Rating:* NR. *Running time:* 100 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Hinako (Yui) left the island of Shikoku as a child, saying goodbye to two best friends in the process: a boy named Fumiya (Michitaka) and the object of his youthful affection, Sayori (Chiyaki), a girl with extraordinary powers as a spiritual medium. Hinako returns to Shikoku as an adult, only to learn that Sayori drowned some years earlier at the age of sixteen. Fumiya has never been the same since her death, nor has Sayori's obsessed mother, the last in a long line of priestesses serving on the island. In fact, Sayori's grieving mother has undertaken a strange and unholy quest: she is visiting all eighty-eight shrines on the island sixteen times, but in the "reverse" order of the ritual. As Hinako and Fumiya soon discover (from an unpublished, secret book called *The Ancient History of Shikoku*), this backwards pilgrimage can transform the island into the Land of the Dead. In fact, in a forested valley, there may be a cave leading to "Yomi," the underworld: a cave leading to Sayori.

COMMENTARY: This Japanese film from director Shunichi Nagasaki is one of the few post-*Ringu* J-Horrors that hasn't yet been remade and repackaged for America in the 21st century.

And that's probably a good thing because Shikoku doesn't trade heavily in popular horror values such as shock and suspense. Instead, it's a gloomy, meditative piece about primal human emotions like love, loneliness and longing. Make no mistake, *Shikoku* is an eerie and macabre genre initiative, but it focuses grimly on the meaning of death and the things that death can take away from those left behind.

It isn't a stretch to declare *Shikoku* a character piece since it assiduously diagrams the sides and lines of an unusual love triangle. Unusually, one point of that love triangle is represented by Sayori, a teenage girl who is dead and gone, but whose luminous, unforgettable presence is still felt everywhere. In her absence (and perhaps *because* of her absence), Hinako and Fumiya grow intimate as they attempt to solve the mystery of the island. They cling to one another but are always aware of the unseen "other" who affects their relationship.

There's an impressive scene during *Shikoku's* second act in which Fumiya describes to Hinako the depth of his love for Sayori, even though she is long gone. Will he ever really love anyone else? Is he "ruined," because of this early loss of his true love? Can he love Hinako in the same deep and irrevocable way that he loves Sayori? The questions hang in the air, raised but not resolved.

This scene is filled with deep, honest emotion, yet never

mawkish. American movies (of any genre) don't often allow characters to talk so directly about feelings, and if they do, it seems corny or forced. But after this scene, we realize that *Shikoku* has more on its mind than scary dead girls with long hair.

Inevitably, the doorway to the Land of the Dead opens in *Shikoku*, and Fumiya makes a fateful choice between the living and the dead. His selection is shocking but entirely appropriate given his character's situation and the undying power of love.

Shikoku eschews flashy pyrotechnics and culminates with a genuine surprise: a long, indepth (and relatively staid) conversation between dead Sayori and the two friends she left behind on this mortal coil. She's delusional and murderous in her "dead state" and believes that she and Fumiya can still have children and carry on the family line. But, of course, that's impossible. And not unlike the resurrected individuals of *Pet Sematary* (1989), Sayori has just one gift remaining that she can bestow upon the mortal friends: death.

There's a real human dimension to *Shikoku* that remains appealing and intriguing and which makes the film stand out amongst the spin-offs, sequels and rip-offs of *Ringu*. Death brings out different instincts in different people. Some deny it. Some grieve it. And some people just categorically refuse to accept death. But there are consequences, we are told in *Shikoku*, to changing the natural order of things, and some of those consequences play out in the film.

To provide a crude comparison, *Shikoku* is like *Ghost* (1990), only without all the sentimental New Age hokum. Unlike *Ghost*, this film doesn't aim to satisfy audiences merely with the belief that "we take the love with us" to the afterlife. Instead it asks questions about regret and fate. It pauses long enough for the dead to ask questions of the living.

Questions such as: "Why did I have to be the one who never got to grow up?"

Beautifully shot and visually realized, *Shikoku* works overtime to establish a mood of dread and doom. At times, a hand-held camera makes viewers actually feel a part of the haunted landscape. This is especially so in the case of the river where Hinako almost dies and where Sayori ultimately drowns. These shots are almost always filmed from water level, as though we're up to our necks in it, drowning too.

After Sayori has returned from the dead (arising through a small pool of water), the water always seems to be reflecting upon her person whether she is actually in it or not. Shunichi Nagasaki is also crafty in the way he shoots the Sayori specter: he shows audiences her eyes and face very infrequently. The result is that Sayori seems ever-

present ... yet somehow distant to us. Often, she is turned away, with her back to the camera, or appears on her knees (below camera level), preserving the mystery of a returnee from the grave. One line in the film tells the audience that "the newly dead come stand by your bed," and a shiver-invoking scene puts that line to the test.

At the end of *Shikoku*, Hinako is informed that she will be the one "who lives." She thus leaves the island of Shikoku, gazing back at the mountain which might just be the gateway to another world. But after everything *Shikoku* reveals, it's not relief the audience feels at her survival. On the contrary, it feels as though Hinako is the one who has been left behind. Her loneliness, like Fumiya's, will continue to haunt her. Especially if love survives beyond the grave.

The Sixth Sense * * * .

Critical Reception

" *The Sixth Sense* is an odd film in that it's borderline dull to sit through but, because of the revelation of its ending, is actually rather interesting to think about afterward, and could conceivably be more rewarding to watch a second time in light of what one knows after seeing it once. Few pictures have had their effectiveness hinge so completely upon information withheld until the last moment, which is not a particularly recommended way to construct a movie but undeniably gives people something to chew over after the fact."—Todd McCarthy, *Variety*, August 8, 1999, page 33

" *The Sixth Sense* is mostly nonsense. This film is not scary, despite the sudden, periodic appearance of Halloween-costumed characters such as Gunshot Boy, Hanged Girl, Hanged Man, Vomiting Girl and Hanged Boy. Unfortunately, there is no development of any of these specters; all we know is somehow they got dead."—Kam Williams, *New York Amsterdam News*, "Leading the Fight Against Mediocrity in Film," August 12, 1999, page 33

"In a modern restaurant, nobody gets to sit down at a table without a place setting appearing in front of them and a drink

order taken within minutes (if not seconds). He's dead, folks. Who lets their kid meet their therapist alone in a weird place for the first meeting? Come on! What's scarier than the film is how many people were taken in by this one."—William Latham, author of *Mary's Monster* and *Eternity Unbound*

"The psychic realm has served as the inspiration for a number of films over the years. In M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*, the psychic tale and the ghost story come together in a masterful piece of cinema. In this film Shyamalan eschews gore and special effects in favor of good storytelling, the creative use of lighting, the symbolism of color, sound, and a twist ending. *The Sixth Sense* brings together a troubled child psychologist and a child who claims to be able to see the dead, and through the exploration of their common angst related to death, Shyamalan presents a frightening and memorable film that may represent his best piece of work to date."—John W. Morehead, *Theofantastique.com*

"M. Night Shyamalan's finest hour, and something of a curse he's been trying to overcome ever since. One of the only horror films to ever be nominated for Best Picture, and rightfully so. Like the best of the *Twilight Zone*, this movie engages us from start to finish, then knocks us over with a brilliant twist in the end. Unfortunately, Shyamalan would subsequently beat this formula into the ground with future efforts."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Bruce Willis (Dr. Malcolm Crowe); Toni Collette (Lynn Sear); Olivia Williams (Abby); Haley Joel Osment (Cole Sear); Donnie Wahlberg (Vincent); Glenn Fitzgerald (Sean); Mischa Barton (Kyra Collins); Trevor Morgan (Tommy); Bruce Norris (Stanley); Peter Tamabkis (Darren); Angelica Torn (Mrs. Collins); Greg Wood (Mr. Collins); M. Night Shyamalan (Dr. Hill).

CREW: Hollywood Pictures presents a Spyglass Entertainment, a Kennedy/Marshall/Barry Mendel Production of an M. Night Shyamalan Film. *Casting:* Avy Kaufman. *Costume Designer:* Joanna Johnston. *Music:* James Newton Howard. *Film Editor:* Andrew Mondschin. *Production Designer:* Larry Fulton. *Director of Photography:* Tak Fujimoto. *Executive Producer:* Sam Mercer. *Produced by:* Frank

Marshall, Kathleen Kennedy, Barry Mendel. *Written and Directed by:* M. Night Shyamalan. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 107 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: On the night he receives a reward from the City of Philadelphia for his outstanding service, married psychologist Malcolm Crowe (Willis) is shot in his home by an old client whom he failed, Vincent Gray (Wahlberg). Sometime later, Crowe is estranged from his wife, Abby (Williams), and ensconces himself in a case involving a troubled little boy, Cole (Osment), who claims to see and communicate with "dead people."

COMMENTARY: M. Night Shyamalan's blockbuster *The Sixth Sense* is an accomplished, highly emotional and stylish film of the supernatural variety. It concerns a creeped-out little boy, played by Haley Joel Osment, who sees dead people. "They don't see each other," he informs Bruce Willis's psychiatrist, Malcolm. "They just see what they want to see. They don't know that they're dead. They're everywhere."

That passage of dialogue reveals much of *The Sixth Sense's* aesthetic. The first thing one must understand about the film is that, structurally, it plays delicately on character and audience assumptions. The entirety of *The Sixth Sense* rests on the director and writer's capability to make audiences feel a certain way in certain scenes, without getting at what is really happening in those scenes until the twist ending reveals all.

In other words, the film encourages certain assumptions and perceptions, and then, in the last scenes, pulls back to reveal a different perspective. Like the ghosts, the audience at first just sees what it wants to see.

Apart from some notable inconsistencies in this approach, *The Sixth Sense* largely accomplishes the goal of tricking the audience, of encouraging perceptions and then pulling out the carpet.

Secondly, and in the fine tradition of postmodern 1990s horror films, *The Sixth Sense* concerns the ways that people tell stories—the act of storytelling itself. What elements go into a successful horror story? Or more relevantly, how must those elements be presented if the story is to succeed?

The film finds its answer in dialogue too, when Malcolm tells

young Cole Sear that the story he just told sucks. "You have to add some twists and stuff," he suggests. Indeed, that's M. Night Shyamalan's method of reviving the kind of supernatural horror film that wasn't as popular in the 1980s and 1990s as it once was: tricks and stuff.

Any criticism of *The Sixth Sense* has to start backwards, with the film's ending. At the conclusion of the film, the audience learns that Malcolm has been dead since the film's opening scene, that he is one of the ghosts that Cole has been seeing, and that, as a ghost, he just sees what he wants to see. He doesn't know he is dead.



Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment, left) and Malcolm (Bruce Willis) form an unusual friendship in *The Sixth Sense* (1999). Bruce Willis)

This is the secret the film has attempted to maintain for a very full, very lengthy running time of 107 minutes. As soon as the audience recognizes that Malcolm is a ghost, it recalls images from the film and is asked, out of memory, to reparse them based on the new knowledge, not based on assumptions.

An early scene, for instance, involves Malcolm visiting Cole in his

apartment, when his mother Lynn (Collette) is present. Malcolm only addresses Cole, but Lynn is in close proximity, so the audience assumes that she is aware of Malcolm's presence, that they've met. He's her child's doctor, after all. This assumption, of course, is entirely wrong. We're seeing the film from Cole's perspective, with both ghosts and humans "visible."

In another scene, set at a restaurant, Malcolm meets with his estranged wife, Abby (Williams), for their wedding anniversary. She doesn't speak to him, and the audience assumes that, since the shooting at the beginning of the film, they've become estranged. She leaves the restaurant and Malcolm behind, and the audience assumes she's mad. She isn't. She doesn't know he's present. Even though she says aloud, "happy anniversary," she is talking to herself, not to the ghost she has no concrete awareness of.

Over and over again, *The Sixth Sense* stages scenes in a way that encourage assumptions, but those assumptions prove wrong. There's a sequence involving Abby meeting with a new boyfriend, slowly embracing a new relationship with a co-worker at a bookstore. Of course, the audience, along with Malcolm, thinks she is contemplating an extra-marital affair. When, in fact, she is merely looking to move on.

All of this is extremely clever, and it's clear that M. Night Shyamalan is a student of human nature, not to mention viewing movie habits, since by and large, audiences do react exactly as he expects; so he can bludgeon them with that trick ending.

Unfortunately, the film is not entirely consistent and in a movie like this, a director must absolutely play by the rules and must absolutely be consistent. Shyamalan is not entirely consistent, and that's why I have not awarded the film four stars, but three-and-a-half.

At certain points in *The Sixth Sense*, the movie cheats. For instance, when Malcolm is first looking to meet with Cole Sear (Seer, get it?), he is holding his work satchel, and writing his clinician notes. Can a ghost hold pens and write on paper with them? Are they ghost pens and paper? Or real ones? (See: *The Frighteners*.)

Similarly, Malcolm is also seen working in his cellar office, again putting pen to paper as a ghost. *The Sixth Sense* does not even attempt to explain ghosts who can use tools ... and write clinical notes.

These might sounds like nitpicks, and yet it is important to remember that the success of *The Sixth Sense* hinges entirely on the trick ending, on the shock of learning that a character the audience believed alive is actually dead. Since this is the case, the way that Shyamalan gets to that ending is crucially important. By and large, he

earns the ending, but some questions are also raised here and left unanswered.

The second aspect of the film is more authentically fascinating, at least to this writer. Shyamalan uses *The Sixth Sense* to discuss how stories are structured: that they need twists and turns to keep people interested and that they must have a perspective that holds the attention.

The hook by which Shyamalan successfully baits the audience in this film is the fact that Cole "has a secret." He keeps hitting that angle, again and again, tantalizing the audience. This isn't "free association," Malcolm's ham-handed attempt to get an answer out of Cole, this is a carefully thought out approach to hook an audience (with talk of a secret), lead the direction one way (with scenes playing on assumptions) and then—zing!—nail them with a trick ending that re-contextualizes the whole drama.

Many critics have complained about twist endings in regards to this and other Shyamalan films, but it seems that for this artist, he enjoys, not unlike Hitchcock, playing the audience like a piano. Of encouraging one life of speculation, and then revealing another altogether. It's really just a switch in perspective and a testament to the power of Shyamalan's writing acumen that so many of his stories feature parallel perspectives. And that, simply by switching between them, Shyamalan successfully surprises his audiences.

This review has consisted largely of abstract concepts, but what grounds *The Sixth Sense* are the performances. Bruce Willis—with that sad pug of a face—plays a man attempting to countenance a professional failure that has led, inexplicably, to a personal failure at home with his wife. And Osment, playing Cole, is fantastic as a little boy who must face a world that nobody else can see or detect. At first, the audience mistakes the boy as an anti-social introvert. He seems not merely shy, but disturbingly "inward" in his demeanor. Once the audience knows what is happening—that there are literally ghosts in the room—the boy's mode of operation, of withholding information, seems absolutely normal.

The Sixth Sense shares much in common with *Ghost* (1990). Neither movie plays entirely fair with the nature of ghostly capabilities, and both stories offer a climactic (and heartfelt) farewell in which career-minded men must open their hearts to the spouses they neglected, at least emotionally. "You were never second, ever," Malcolm tells Abby. "I love you."

What *The Sixth Sense* doesn't reveal, unlike *Ghost*, however, is Malcolm's next act. Is he doomed to hang around for eternity? He

states he "can go now," that he just needed to "do a couple of things," to "help someone." But the movie never diagrams the parameters of a Heavenly or Hellish afterlife. That's not a drawback per se, just an interesting twist, to bring up that term again.

So much thought went into the film's structure, perhaps, that the movie didn't have time to consider the structure of the afterlife.

Sleepy Hollow * * * *

Critical Reception

"With this high-octane Gothic comic-book, Tim Burton continues his unique, idiosyncratic, and very personal career project: to re-experience and revivify the toy chest of pop-culture effluvia that sustained him—and many of us—through our 'Nam era childhoods.... However thin in the story department (like all of Burton's films), it's a fabulous hoot and you feel the filmmaker's macabre delight in every frame."—Michael Atkinson and Laurel Shifrin, *Flickipedia: Perfect Films for Every Occasion, Holiday, Mood, Ordeal and Whim*, Chicago Review Press, 2007, page 21

"Tim Burton's career has seen some hits and misses and this is definitely one of the hits. As homage to the great old Hammer Films, this captures the same sort of gothic atmosphere but with Burton's quirky humor and stylistic sensibilities permeating it all, making for a winning combination. Johnny Depp's Ichabod Crane is an inspired creation (and something Washington Irving never envisioned), continuing his regular pattern of delivering his best work for Burton. Danny Elfman offers one of his finest scores and unlike most of Burton's films, the action scenes work very, very well. If nothing more, this film delivered a well-known literary character (Crane) in an entirely different light and one we would have liked to have seen in sequels, facing more perverse mysteries with his unique detective toolkit. This is the film that *Van Helsing* wanted to be. The scene in the old windmill makes you almost expect Boris Karloff to snarl out of a corner chasing Colin Clive. The Christopher Lee cameo at the beginning of the film puts us on the right path from the get go—it's too bad they don't make more films like this. Christopher Walken's horseman is suitably creepy and the cast is fine across the board."—

"*Sleepy Hollow* is an entertaining period film that draws upon Washington Irving's folktale *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. Several influences are notable in the film, including atmosphere of Hammer Films horror movies, and a nod to Disney's classic cartoon with Ichabod Crane and the Headless Horseman from *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad*. *Sleepy Hollow* also includes an interesting tension between Christianity, rationalism, and folk magic. In addition to the fine acting turned in by its leading stars and supporting cast (such as a brief but memorable part played by Christopher Lee), the sets themselves turn in a memorable performance rivaling that of the actors, providing an eerie sense of mood and character that contributes to the fantasy and horror elements of the film. Those interested in a period piece of Gothic horror will not be disappointed by one of Tim Burton's best pieces of filmmaking."—John W. Morehead, *Theofantastique.com*

"An excellent period piece from Tim Burton, one dripping with his trademark style, and takes the Headless Horseman legend to previously unseen cinematic heights. Johnny Depp is inspired in the lead role, as is a supporting cast that includes Christina Ricci, Jeffrey Jones and Michael Gough. Equally inspired is the casting choice of Christopher Walken for the horseman!"—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Johnny Depp (Ichabod Crane); Christina Ricci (Katrina Van Tassel); Miranda Richardson (Lady Van Tassel); Michael Gambon (Baltus Van Tassel); Christopher Walken (The Headless Horseman); Casper Van Dien (Van Brunt); Jeffrey Jones (Steenwyck); Ian McDiarmid (Dr. Lancaster); Christopher Lee (Judge); Michael Gough (Hardenbook); Lisa Marie (Lady Crane); Martin Landau.

CREW: Mandalay Pictures and Paramount Pictures Present a Scott Rudin/American Zoetrope Picture, a Tim Burton film. *Casting:* Ilene Starger, Susie Figgs. *Co-Producer:* Kevin Yagher. *Music:* Danny Elfman. *Costume Designer:* Colleen Atwood. *Film Editor:* Chris Lebenzon. *Production Designer:* Rick Heinrichs. *Director of Photography:* Emmanuel Lubezki. *Executive Producer:* Francis Ford Coppola, Larry Franco. *Based upon the story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" by*

Washington Irving. *Written by:* Kevin Yagher, Andrew Kevin Walker. *Produced by:* Scott Rudin, Adam Schroeder. *Directed by:* Tim Burton. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 105 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: Rational and scientific constable Ichabod Crane (Depp) is sent to the Dutch farming community of Sleepy Hollow to investigate a series of grisly murders allegedly caused by a spectral avenger called the Headless Horseman (Walken). When he arrives, Crane begins to uncover evidence of witchcraft in the Van Tassel family, even as he grows close to Baltus Van Tassel's (Gambon) daughter, Katrina (Ricci). Is it possible that someone is summoning the dark spirit for Earthly gain, and if so, who could it be?

COMMENTARY: Tim Burton's colorful and lush *Sleepy Hollow* commences with a superb joke. It's one that a horror enthusiast will enjoy. What seems to be very fake-looking red blood drips down upon parchment. It is soon revealed instead to be hot wax, used merely to seal an important missive, a letter.

But for a fleeting moment, the horror audience may believe it has actually returned to the wonderful world of Hammer Studios, since the hot wax resembles that trademark Hammerstyled blood.

Although based (very loosely) on the 1820 short story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" by Washington Irving (1783–1859), Tim Burton's *Sleepy Hollow* serves instead as a dedicated tribute to the output of Hammer Studios, England's preeminent exporter of horror during the late 1950s and 1960s. Not only does this film feature familiar horror actors from the Hammer stable, including Christopher Lee and Michael Gough, it is also, like the works of that studio, largely set-bound, and embodies a similar, heavy sense of Gothic romanticism.

In other words, *Sleepy Hollow* drips with atmosphere, depicts strange, supernatural rituals, and generates extreme emotions in its *dramatis personae* (and audience), namely terror.

Writing in *Entertainment Design*, John Calhoun reported that, from the outset of production on *Sleepy Hollow*, director Burton reported how he desired to "evoke the Hammer Film style," one that was notably "artifice-heavy."⁸¹



Ichabod Crane (Johnny Depp) arrives in the town of Sleepy Hollow, home of the Headless Horseman, in Tim Burton's *Sleepy Hollow* (1999).

Considering this approach, *Sleepy Hollow* is not just a period piece set at the turn of a century (1799), it is a piece that evokes an older period in horror film history too: 1958–1965, or thereabouts. The autumnal woods surrounding Sleepy Hollow evoke Hammer's visual tradition, dominated by fog, mist and craggy, ancient-seeming trees that could come to life at any moment. Even Johnny Depp's lead performance as the prone-to-fainting Ichabod Crane recalls Roddy McDowall, with a dash of Peter Cushing's regality and distance thrown in for good measure.

Thematically, *Sleepy Hollow* showcases a battle between science and superstition. Crane has put his faith in technology and reason and believes that "to detect the guilty," science is the best tool.

Almost immediately, Crane's plan is put to the test, and he encounters a world of very real superstition and witchcraft. Crane rejects these principles at first, in part because his mother was a witch (a good witch) and he lost her in a painful, violent manner to a society that condemns such practitioners. Looking at Crane's dream sequences involving his mother, they pointedly contrast with the soot-and-industrial look of New York. The "cherry-blossom-filled reveries"⁸² suggest a world beyond reason and nature.

Similarly, the artificial look of the terrain around Sleepy Hollow connects to Crane's suppressed past. It is a world not our own, one where such things as monsters and witches do exist. It's not just that the landscape harks back to a noble horror movie tradition, however; it is that the land is magical, enchanted. By film's end, the battle becomes not a war between science and superstition but over how to responsibly use witchcraft.

In *Sleepy Hollow*, the Headless Horseman has been raised by a woman hoping to assure her wealth, a commentary, perhaps, that the love of money is the root of all evil. Ichabod Crane finally accepts his mother's death and her nature as a witch and joins the fight to stop the evil black magician in the film.

Burton has become known as the master of the re-imagination in Hollywood. He has secured and then re-made, with his own brand of aesthetics, popular properties from literature such as *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005) and even *Planet of the Apes* (2001).

In *Sleepy Hollow*, which pre-dates all those so-called re-imaginings, Burton leaves behind many aspects of Irving's short story, including the identity of Ichabod Crane as a schoolteacher, and the story's solution, which hints that there is a human, rational man and motivation (romantic rivalry) behind the legend of the Headless Horseman, a Hessian mercenary killed in a nameless battle in the Revolutionary War.

Burton keeps some touchstones of the story including the location in Tarrytown (Sleepy Hollow), the character names, Ichabod's weak constitution, and the villain, the Headless Horseman. But he makes Crane America's earliest forensic pathologist and the Headless Horseman a real supernatural entity. The reason for doing this, perhaps, involves Burton's own personal interest in one type of character: the outsider. In virtually all of his films, an outsider comes

into a closed society and challenges its way.

Whether it is Leo Davidson in *Planet of the Apes*, Batman, Pee Wee Herman, Edward Scissorhands, or even Ed Wood, almost every character in Burton's canon reflects this status as an outcast. Crane, simply put, is a man of science in the supernatural world depicted in *Sleepy Hollow*.

But, although whip smart and clever, he lacks his "natural gift," handed down to him by his mother: his capacity for belief in something greater than the resources and wonders of man's mind. In this sense, one might gaze at *Sleepy Hollow* as a tale of one man's spiritual, even religious, awakening.

The Headless Horseman is an outcast too, a Hessian doomed to walk the Earth at the behest of an evil mistress. *Sleepy Hollow* involves the freeing of this spirit and outcast too, and the Hessian is almost a mirror for Crane: a man who exists in a purely supernatural (rather than scientific) state and must be put to rest—to the clinical, empirical state of death—upon which his release hinges.

Like so many horror films of the 1990s, *Sleepy Hollow* concerns a conspiracy, one involving the aristocrats of Sleepy Hollow and a plan to secure continued wealth, but the look of the film is unlike virtually anything else in the decade, a fact that distinguishes the Burton film mightily and makes repeat watching extremely rewarding.

Verdant and teeming with implications, *Sleepy Hollow* deploys its artificial, Hammer-inspired environs to suggest the possibility of a world beyond the real, a world of belief beyond that dreamed of in useful, but ultimately hollow science.

The Stendahl Syndrome * * .

Cast and Crew

CAST: Asia Argento (Anna Manni); Thomas Kretschmann (Alfredo Grossi); Marco Leonardi (Marco Longhi); Luigi Deberti (Ispettore Manetti); Julian Lambroschini (Marie); John Quentin (Padre Anna); Franco Diogene (Marito Vittma); Sonia Topazio (Vittma Firenze); Paolo Bonacelli (Doctor Cavanna); Lorenzo Crespi (giullo); Vera Gemma (Donna Poliziotto); John Pedeforri (Ingegnere); Veronica Lazi (Madri); Mario Diano (Medico); Maximillian Nisi (Luigi); Leonardo Ferrantini (Alessandro); Sandro Giordano (Fausto); Cinzia

Moreau (Moglie Alfredo Grossi).

CREW: Una Produzione Medusa Film, Reclizzata da Cine 2000. A film produced and directed by Dario Argento. *Fotografia:* Giuseppe Rotunno. *Scenografia:* Antonello Geleng. *Costumi:* Lia Morandini. *Special Effects Elaborazioni Digitali:* Sergio Stivaletti. *Inspired by the book by:* Graziella Magherini. *Sceneggiatura:* Dario Argento. *Music:* Ennio Morricone. *Montaggio:* Angelo Nicolini. *Organizzatore Generale:* Walter Massi. *Produced by:* Giuseppe Columbo. *Directed by:* Dario Argento. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 120 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: An Italian detective, Anna Manni (Argento), visits a museum in Florence while pursuing a suspect, a brutal serial killer. Unexpectedly, she has a psychological reaction to the gorgeous artwork inside, a reaction called "The Stendahl Syndrome" and embodied by a powerful trance state. Soon, the killer, Alfredo (Kretschmann), abducts, terrorizes and rapes the impaired Anna. She eventually does battle with the monster but then must face a life after the violence, a life that doesn't seem the same.

COMMENTARY: "Works of art have power over us. Great works have great power," declares Alfredo—a serial killer—in *The Stendahl Syndrome*, a violent but nearly lyrical horror thriller from the great Italian director, Dario Argento.

The movie stars Argento's daughter Asia as a serial killer—hunting Italian detective, Anna. She unexpectedly is affected by great works of art and even finds herself inhabiting them in moments bordering on psychosis. This strange syndrome is biographical for the director. Apparently, Argento once had a similar reaction as a child.

The powerful idea lurking in the dark heart of *The Stendahl Syndrome* is that some people create art on canvas, and other people paint their masterpieces on human skin, in human blood. The serial killer, Alfredo, uses Anna as his slate, cutting her with his artist's tool, a razor blade, and re-shaping her into a frightened masterwork that might be named "victim."

After Anna beats Alfredo, she is uncertain how to reclaim the canvas as her own. At one point in the film, she paints creepy paintings to exorcise her demons. In another instance, she actually covers her whole body in paint, aware that it was the thing re-shaped

to someone else's design. Her boyfriend tells her not to "despise" herself because she was attacked and raped, but the problem is even more basic than that. Anna does not know who she is anymore, even with the help of a therapist.

Sadly, Anna's attempt to "own" her canvas goes awry. She dons a blond wig (and Alfredo was a blonde man), fashioning herself in the image of the artist or God who so dramatically altered her life. Ultimately, Anna even re-shapes herself into a killer, painting her own bloody victims (including a new boyfriend) in the manner that the serial killer did. She finally confesses that he is "inside" her (just as all artists are inside their "art").

The Stendahl Syndrome adopts the oft-seen (in the 1990s) police procedural format and in some ways is Argento's answer to *The Silence of the Lambs*. This film looks very specifically at the psychic connection between killer and prey, not from Dr. Lecter's psychological probing, but rather using the leitmotifs of the art world instead, with scenes occurring in galleries and so forth.

This is appropriate because Argento has always had an artist's eye for seeing things. Here, he renders some gory compositions with digital effects, which don't look strictly realistic, but in keeping with the movie's form, more impressionistic. When Anna pops a pill, for instance, there's a CGI representation of the medicine traveling down her throat. And in another scene, the serial killer shoots a bullet through a victim's cheek, and with CGI we follow the bullet through flesh and bone. In both cases, the imagination at work is impressive.

If *The Stendahl Syndrome* disappoints at all (and it is widely considered one of Argento's lesser works), responsibility must fall on Asia Argento. I realize she is a horror icon and much beloved, but she seems wrong for the part of this police detective. She is too slight, almost too bird-like to be believable as a law-enforcement official. But on the other side of the equation, Argento is also stone-faced for much of the film, projecting no internal sense of life or intimacy. Since so much of the film hinges on the psychological changes going on inside this woman, the audience needs an in. It needs to see the battle going on inside her. But Anna seems like a stone, and so when she changes—when she transforms into a killer herself—it is a baffling development and the movie's intent is not effectively transmitted in the execution. Allegedly, Bridget Fonda was once considered for the part of Anna, and she might have been a better choice, as she is an actress capable of projecting to the audience a sense of the inner person.

Despite this flaw, *The Stendahl Syndrome* is beautifully shot, with

the "dreamy" Stendahl hallucination sequences proving unexpectedly poetic and memorable. And unlike Asia Argento, Kretschmann projects an inner self capably, and his character proves a memorable creep. So much so, in fact, that you miss his perverted presence when it's gone.

Stigmata * * *

Critical Reception

"Although it's no *Exorcist*, this Roman Catholicism-inspired supernatural film is nevertheless very effective, with fine performances from Patricia Arquette and Gabriel Byrne. Just when you thought the subgenre of religious horror had been sufficiently explored, this movie came along and proved there was more to be done."—Brian Solomon, *VaultofHorror.net*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Patricia Arquette (Frankie Paige); Gabriel Byrne (Andrew Kiernan); Jonathan Pryce (Cardinal Houseman); Nia Long (Donna); Enrico Colantoni (Father Dario); Dick Latessa (Father Delmonico); Thomas Kopache (Father Durning); Ann Cusack (Dr. Reston); Portia De Rossi (Jennifer); Patrick Muldoon (Steven); Rade Sherbedgia (Marion Petrucelli); Shaun Taub (Doctor).

CREW: MGM presents an FGM Entertainment Production, a Rupert Wainright film. *Casting:* Wendy Kurtzman. *Executive Music Producer:* Budd Carr. *Music:* Billy Corgan, Elia Cmiril. *Costume Designer:* Louise Frogley. *Film Editors:* Michael M. Miller, Michael J. Duthie. *Production Designer:* Waldemar Kalinomesky. *Director of Photography:* Jeffrey L. Kimball. *Produced by:* Frank Mancuso, Jr. *Written by:* Tom Lazarus, Rick Ramage. *Story by:* Tom Lazarus. *Directed by:* Rupert Wainright. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 102 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A young, promiscuous hairdresser in Los Angeles, Frankie (Arquette), acquires the rosary of a dead Brazilian priest, one whose church displayed a strange, bleeding statue. Suddenly, Frankie begins

to experience frightening religious visions, as though possessed. A renegade priest, Father Kiernan (Byrne), investigates the case and comes to understand that Frankie's predicament is somehow involved with a missing, or perhaps hidden, gospel that would prove dangerous to the Catholic Church if widely known.

COMMENTARY: Although *Stigmata* concerns the visceral horror of spiritual (not demonic) possession, the film actually functions not as a critique of spirituality or religious belief, but rather as an overt critique of man's modern world.

The institution that raises the film's ire is the behemoth Catholic Church itself, which in *Stigmata* has been orchestrating a wide-ranging conspiracy to do the world a great harm. Specifically, the Church has been hiding the Gospel of St. Thomas, "The Secret Sayings of the Living Jesus," from the world at large.

The Church has thus shrouded the "most significant Christian relic ever found" because Jesus, in his own words, dismisses the need for a church at all. Basically, the Gospel reads: the Kingdom of God is inside you, not made of buildings or wood and stone.

The Gospel of St. Thomas is not a work of fiction. On the contrary, it was discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945 and is a collection of quotations from Jesus, recorded by St. Thomas. A Coptic text, it has been judged by many as a work of heretics. The Church considers it heretical, and some people believe it is a forgery with no apostolic authority. In the Gospel of St. Thomas there is no mention of a virgin birth in regards to Jesus, no mention of a resurrection in over one hundred quotations, and the text focuses largely on matters of love and helping the poor. In the controversial text, Jesus says that if you know yourself, you are as God's child yourself. If you don't, you will live in poverty. In other words, the Gospel of St. Thomas presents the view that Jesus was a philosopher, one who believed that immortality comes from an awareness of one's self, not external worship in a church pew every Sunday. It's not hard to see why so many Christians have sought to dismiss it.

Stigmata takes the Gospel of St. Thomas and uses it as the vehicle by which to critique the modern world at the turn of the twentieth century. The film's protagonist, Frankie, lives in a world devoid of sunshine. The urban environment around her is entirely silver and blue—cold— and perpetually rain-swept. The movie's color palette informs us that God's light and God's grace does not penetrate her

secular world. Frankie herself is portrayed as a loving, but deeply lost individual. In short order, the film depicts her smoking, drinking alcohol, engaging in casual sex and listening to hard rock and roll. Additionally, Frankie is a self-professed atheist.

The movie's point, regarding Frankie, is that the truth, the message of Christ, has been withheld from her and the world itself, so that wisdom and self-knowledge eludes her. By denying people like Frankie the knowledge that God is inside us, not in a judgmental, law-giving Church hierarchy overseen by old men interested in holding power, the Church has essentially doomed the world to aimless, purposeless melancholy.

The religious iconography bleeds in *Stigmata* because Jesus's message to mankind has been intercepted and re-directed towards protecting entrenched power, not serving its true purpose: liberating human souls with a sense of internal, individual divinity.

Perhaps not too strangely, many reviewers (particularly Roger Ebert) deeply, *deeply* misunderstood the story *Stigmata* dramatized. Ebert wrote in his review: "It confuses the phenomenon of stigmata with satanic possession, thinks stigmata can be transmitted by relics and portrays the Vatican as a conspiracy against miracles."⁸³

Yet *Stigmata* never actually implies Satanic or demonic possession; that's Ebert's personal misreading, not the film's. And yes, Frankie comes into possession of a sacred relic that spurs the spiritual possession, but so what? The Church denies that possession, that miracle, because never before in history has a non-believer been struck down by such "symptoms."

The point of the film is that after so many centuries of the Church perverting the real message of Christ, there are very few or legitimate believers left. "The real miracle is that anybody believes anything," notes Father Andrew Kiernan soulfully, acknowledging that organized religion in the modern, technological age is backward and ineffective at capturing hearts and minds. That's a great irony, since the Church has it in its power to present a Christian belief that would find currency—the Kingdom of God is inside everybody—but will not transmit and authorize that message because it fears losing its wealth, its privilege, its diplomatic immunity and other perks of being God's apparent handmaidens on planet Earth.



Frankie (Patricia Arquette) is possessed by a spirit with a message for the Church, and for humanity, in *Stigmata* (1999). message (1999).

Frankie is destined to receive and bear stigmata because even with all of her sin and pain, she remains, perhaps, the closest thing to a "pure" soul that can be found on Earth at the turn of the millennium. As a non-believer, she has rejected the lies of the Church already and is outside the influence of the Church hierarchy. It's a hierarchy that we now know, post-2010, protected deviant child molesters for years.

What *Stigmata* depicts is an end-of-millennium message of a world upside down, or out of order, because "The Sayings of the Living Jesus" have not been heard and understood accurately. In keeping with the vision of a world disordered, the film provides images of nature confounded, like drops of water "falling" upwards, and so forth. Because no one has heard these sayings, they are misinterpreted by threats. "Split a piece of wood, and I'll be there. Lift a stone and you'll find me." But man has devalued the Earth: the wood, the stones, the water, because Jesus's message is not heeded.

Stigmata is a frightening, personal film involving one woman's terrifying and confounding journey. Frankie's journey is so terrifying because it is not easily understood; those around her cannot interpret what is happening to her, or will not interpret it. She suffers terribly as her body is marred by the five wounds of Christ on the Cross. Yet interpreted a certain way, this suffering represents the planet's Red Alert to the human race. It's on the wrong path, *Stigmata* implies, and only something major, a supernatural intervention, can turn things around, if anyone is listening at all.

Stigmata is a deeply spiritual film, one that does not attack God, Christ, or religion in general, but rather the men— *the bureaucrats*—who make a living administrating religion and having something to

gain by maintaining the status quo. Virtually every critic misinterpreted the film as a schlocky religious horror film akin to *The Exorcist*.

A parable was spake unto them, and they were blind.

Stir of Echoes * * * *

Critical Reception

"*Stir* is perfectly competent, and sometimes it's better than that. Bacon is right on the mark as the everyman who finds himself terrorized by a world he didn't know existed. Koepp (best-known as the screenwriter behind megahits like *Jurassic Park*) grounds his fantasy in gritty realism and holds it together with lots of tension-relieving humor."—Robert Butler, *The Kansas City Star*, September 9, 1999

"The sleeper success of *The Sixth Sense* may bode well for *Stir of Echoes*, another low-key, character-driven supernatural drama with a minimum of graphic violence and an abundance of across-the-board audience appeal. Screenwriter-turnedauteur David Koepp's sophomore effort as a multihyphenate (following *The Trigger Effect*) is a white-knuckle thriller propelled by Kevin Bacon's exceptional performance as a working-class Everyman who discovers dark secrets under his own roof after inadvertently gaining precognitive powers."—Joe Leydon, *Variety*, August 23, 1999, pages 4/5

"*The Sixth Sense* got all the press in 1999, but this old-fashioned ghost story is just as powerful. Working from a novel by Richard Matheson, writer/director David Koepp clearly understands that, in order to make audiences believe in the supernatural, he has to produce believable characters. Within the first five minutes of the film, Kevin Bacon is deftly established as an ultra-rational everyman whose adult life isn't nearly as interesting as he thought it would be. Like him, we are both eager and anxious to get drawn into a hypnotic, dreamy, and largely unpredictable world where the dead co-exist with the living. And that is exactly why *Stir of Echoes* is so engaging. Koepp and his cast expertly

craft the story's emotional escalation, adding just enough realism to this classic funhouse horror."—Joseph Maddrey, *Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film*

Cast and Crew

CAST: Kevin Bacon (Tom); Kathryn Erbe (Maggie); Ileana Douglas (Lisa); Zachary David Cope (Jake); Kevin Dunn (Frank); Conor O'Farrell (Henry); Jenny Morrison (Samantha); Mary Kay Cook (Vanessa); Luisa Strus (Sheila); Steve Rifkin (Kurt).

CREW: Artisan Entertainment presents a Huffland/Palone Film. *Casting:* Mary Colquhoun. *Casting:* Rachel Tenner, Mickie Paskel. *Music:* James Newton Howard. *Costume Designer:* Leesa Evans. *Film Editor:* Jill Savitt. *Production Designer:* Nelson Coates. *Director of Photography:* Fred Murphy. *Executive Producer:* Michele Wiegler. *Based on the novel by:* Richard Matheson. *Produced by:* Gavin Polone. *Written and directed by:* David Koepp. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 94 minutes.

INCANTATION: "I am glad that the *Blair Witch Project* came along, and *Sixth Sense*. What would worry me is if a bunch of scary movies had come out lately and flopped because they were bad, and people were burned out on the genre.... So, I'm glad that people are going and they seem to be enjoying these films, because it means that the genre is still vital."⁸⁴—David Koepp discusses the environment into which *A Stir of Echoes* was released

SYNOPSIS: At a party, blue collar family man Tom Linsky (Bacon) is hypnotized by his sister, Lisa (Douglas), and given the suggestion to have "an open mind." Almost immediately, Tom begins to see visions of ghosts, and of a missing local girl, Samantha (Morrison). As Tom tries to deal with these horrors, his family life becomes increasingly tense. After sending his wife (Maggie) and son away, Tom feels compelled to rip apart his row house ... and dig for something in the back yard.

COMMENTARY: *A Stir of Echoes* takes its title from a poem called "Chambers of Imagery" by Archibald MacLeish (1892–1982), and its overall narrative structure from Richard Matheson's 1958 novel.

In the book *A Stir of Echoes*, the main character, Tom Wallace, is hypnotized by his brother-in-law at a party and soon begins to experience frightening visions of a woman in black. Worse, Tom is now psychic, and he begins to "hear" the thoughts of friends and neighbors. The novel plays explicitly on the 1950s–early 1960s fascination with hypnosis but also looks at how easy it is for the "normal" world to be shaken off and for something unseen, unknown and even sinister, to appear in its place.

The 1999 movie adapted and directed by David Koepp sticks to the basics of a story: a man named Tom Linsky is hypnotized by his playful sister, but it offers a new central mystery for Tom to solve, one involving a different ghost and a different killer.

The central conceit of *A Stir of Echoes* is being able to "see" the world in a different way. Tom is hypnotized, literally, to be open-minded, and that's no small thing. He lives with his family in a "decent neighborhood" of close homes, but a girl has gone missing, no one has reported seeing what happened to her, and the police have been unsuccessful solving the crime. When Tom starts to have "an open mind" he leaves behind the clubbiness of that decent neighborhood and learns the truth.

The murder and murderers revealed in *Stir of Echoes* are not that far distant in shape and intent from those surrounding the notorious Glen Ridge case of 1989. There, several popular highschool football players raped a mentally-retarded girl, and the affluent boys were protected by their well-to-do families and the best lawyers that money could buy.

Similarly, in *Stir of Echoes*, a conspiracy of silence among parents protects two high-school boys, Adam and Kurt—popular football players—who attempted to lure the mentally-handicapped and overly friendly Samantha to a house undergoing renovation where they could have sex with her undisturbed. When she loudly protested the boys suffocated her with plastic sheets.

As a ghost, Samantha transmits to Tom (now a receiver) the message "dig," and that's what he does both metaphorically and literally to uncover the truth of this small, tightly-knit community. Being "open-minded" for Tom means breaking with his friends and neighbors and serving a higher, moral cause. Being open-minded, in this instance, also means being heroic and going against peer pressure and group-think.

As in the best and most artistic of horror films, *Stir of Echoes* is a movie in which the form clarifies and intensifies the movie's content. In "Uneasy Street" an article by John Calhoun in *Interiors*, the author explained how the film's very setting was designed to echo the theme:

Proximity is crucial to *Stir of Echoes*. Coates uses the tightly spaced homes on Tom's block— still inhabited by Kozacs and McCarthys—to emphasize community cohesion. When Tom digs up his patch of backyard and jackhammers his kitchen tiles, he clearly blights the whole neighborhood—and vanquishes the very spirit that made murder and its cover-up possible.⁸⁵

In other words, the neighborhood, with all those close, small houses, is a character in and of itself, a place where the horror was bred. The surface appearance is warm, inviting, close-knit, but the underneath is empty, hollow, even plastic by comparison, a shell where values are just words, not closely-held beliefs or determiners of action.

Stir of Echoes also articulates the consequences for whistleblowers in cases like this (and there was, indeed, a brave young whistleblower in the Glen Ridge case as well). In attempting to determine the truth, Tom experiences difficulties with his family, particularly his wife, and risks being ostracized ... then murdered by his former friend and neighborhoods.



Blue-collar Tom (Kevin Bacon) unexpectedly gets an "open mind" after his sister hypnotizes him in *Stir of Echoes* (1999).

Being open-minded can come at a cost, the film states, but Tom

also knows that he will never be free of this particular "ghost" if he doesn't do the right thing, if he doesn't follow the clues to where they ultimately lead. A lot like *Flatliners* or *Ghost, Stir of Echoes* is a supernatural story that is really about the re-establishment of a moral compact in the United States after the avaricious, yuppie 1980s. As Tom notes, "This is the most important thing I've ever done," and he's right.

In *Stir of Echoes*, Tom is not the only one with an open mind. His child can also see Samantha, the ghost. This is recognition, perhaps, that children are born as open books, believing in all possibilities, discounting nothing. The imagination of a child like Jake allows for the possibility of things not dreamed of in adult philosophy. And tellingly, Jake isn't afraid of the ghosts. "Don't be afraid of it, Daddy," he pleads.

It's only when the adult world indoctrinates children like Jake into a more concrete brand of thinking—into the world of fear and secrets—that they become incapable of seeing "the other world." It's no coincidence that on the threshold of adulthood, the children of this neighborhood sin so egregiously, and against one of their own too. They have learned it from their parents, to be afraid. The kids here (as the ones in Glen Ridge did) have "everything ahead of them" one father notes, but that's not enough justification to permit murder.

Stir of Echoes is superbly acted, with Kevin Bacon finding the essence of a man who is first on the edge of hysteria, and then on the edge of establishing himself as something he can be proud of: a man who tells the truth, who blows the whistle on a terrible crime. Tom has always been afraid of being small, of not achieving. The task of digging, literally, for the truth gives his life a new purpose.

Stir of Echoes is appreciably scary too, with sudden, unblinking lurches into the ghost world, a domain where light, sound and movement seem to play by different rules. Koepp directs the film ably, ramping up the tension and terror step-bystep. Dedicated, smart, and "open-minded," *Stir of Echoes* is probably a better supernatural film, pound for pound, than *The Sixth Sense*, especially since it doesn't hinge entirely on any one gimmick. Instead, the film's theme of a cover-up is reflected in the movie's form, and the story, related to events in modern America, resonates.

***Teaching Mrs. Tingle* * * ***

CAST: Katie Holmes (Leigh Anne); Helen Mirren (Mrs. Tingle); Jeffrey Tambor (Coach Winchell); Barry Watson (Luke Churner); Marisa Coughlan (Jo Lynn Jordan); Liz Stauber (Trudie Tucker); Michael McKean (Mr. Potter); Molly Ringwald (Miss Banks); Vivica A. Fox (Mrs. Gold); John Patrick White (Brian); Robert Gant (Professor).

CREW: Dimension Films Presents a Konrad Pictures Production, an Interscope Pictures Production of a film by Kevin Williamson. *Casting:* Lisa Beach. *Costume Designer:* Sussie Desanto. *Music:* John Frizzelli. *Film Editor:* Debra Neil Fisher. *Production Designer:* Naomi Shohan. *Director of Photography:* Jerzy Zielinski. *Executive Producer:* Ted Field, Scott Kroopf, Erica Huggins, Bob and Harvey Weinstein. *Produced by:* Cathy Konrad. *Written and Directed by:* Kevin Williamson. *MPAA Rating:* PG-13. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: At Grandsboro High School, history teacher Mrs. Tingle (Mirren) lords it over the faculty and student body with her imperious, arrogant, fearsome manner. She accuses straight-A student Leigh Anne (Holmes) of cheating on the final, after giving her a bad grade on her project. Desperate, Leigh Anne, her best friend Jo Lynn (Coughlan) and troublemaker Luke (Watson) visit Mrs. Tingle at her home in the evening to explain that it was Luke and Jo Lynn who were cheating, not Leigh Anne. Mrs. Tingle refuses to believe the explanation and matters get out of hand as the teens bind and kidnap the teacher, keeping Mrs. Tingle a virtual prisoner in her own bedroom. Soon, Mrs. Tingle and Leigh Anne wage a battle of the nerves for domination.

COMMENTARY: Kevin Williamson's last horrororiented gasp of the 1990s, *Teaching Mrs. Tingle*, met with some problems before its theatrical release. Originally known as *Killing Mrs. Tingle*, the film's controversial title was altered in the sensitive cultural environment following the school shootings at Columbine in Littleton, Colorado. But the replacement title, *Teaching Mrs. Tingle*, doesn't quite have the same punch. Coupled with a PG-13 rating, the general impression of the film, not entirely accurate, was that it was watered done.

Many critics seemed to dislike the film, and it received largely

negative reviews. Although rated PG-13, the complaints about a lack of horror are not entirely well-grounded. This film features scenes of dramatic psychological horror: cruel mental abuse of the highest order from one of the decade's personality-driven celebrity "monsters," Helen Mirren's bitter, sarcastic, but splendidly drawn, Mrs. Tingle.



Aspiring actress Jo Lynn (Marisa Coughlan, left) and A student Leigh Ann (Katie Holmes) get caught cheating in Kevin Williamson's *Teaching Mrs. Tingle* (1999).

Teaching Mrs. Tingle was created during the height of the Lewinsky Scandal, Bill Clinton's "inappropriate" relationship with a twenty-something intern. Clinton's shadow, accordingly, looms large over the film. We see Clinton's smiling presidential photograph staring down at us from the wall in the guidance counselor's office, and the screenplay tangentially refers to his unfaithful escapades. "Our political leader's indiscretions have had an impact on our country."

Impressively, *Teaching Mrs. Tingle* attempts to chart that impact. The teens in the film, faced with a woman who is after them (not unlike Ken Starr was after Clinton), break the rules. They do something they shouldn't: they attempt to cheat on her exam. Mrs. Tingle, a puritan of sorts, thinks that this infraction is worth the students' entire future (as Clinton's presidency was on the line) and abhors the "selfish, mindless pursuits" of her students.

The would-be class valedictorian in *Teaching Mrs. Tingle*, Leigh Anne, is even linked thematically with witch-hunts, which was a term frequently bandied about by the Republican pursuit of the bad-acting commander-in-chief. Specifically, Leigh Anne has created an accurate 17th century journal of a woman accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake. Leigh Anne's identification with that woman leads Tingle to

ask, "Always the victim, aren't we, Ms. Watson?"

And that's exactly how many Republicans viewed President Clinton and his wife's accusations of a vast right-wing conspiracy.

But, also in keeping with the impeachment scandal, *Teaching Mrs. Tingle* notes that those wagging the judgmental finger of morality at the unfaithful President Clinton were, in fact, hypocrites. In the film, Mrs. Tingle, who worries about the "impact" of indiscretions upon American society, is secretly having an affair with the high school football coach. Meanwhile, the coach's wife is at home reading the Bible. The pure of heart are being misled and deceived by the actions of those they trust.



Leigh Ann (Holmes, left) and Luke (Barry Watson) are alarmed when Mrs. Tingle vanishes in *Teaching Mrs. Tingle*.

In the impeachment saga, many of the Republicans most loudly accusing Clinton of sexual misdeeds were similarly hypocritical. The man in the House of Representatives leading the charge against Clinton was Henry Hyde. As a married man in his forties, he had carried on a sexual liaison with a married woman, Cherie Snodgrass, for five years, and the relationship eventually broke up the Snodgrass family, which included children at home.⁸⁶

Similarly, Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich had an affair while married to his first wife and initiated divorce proceedings while she was in the hospital battling cancer. Apparently

not one to learn from his mistakes, Gingrich also cheated on his second wife, even as he was "leading the charge" against Bill Clinton in Congress.⁸⁷

Gingrich's would-be successor as Speaker, Bob Livingston of Louisiana, resigned from Congress during the impeachment proceedings after the press learned he had also stepped out on his marriage on more than one occasion. Republican representative Dan Burton, who publicly called Bill Clinton a "scumbag," was later forced to admit to the press that he had fathered an illegitimate child out of wedlock.⁸⁸

The list goes on and on. Republicans including Charles Canady, Helen Chenoweth, Sue Myrick, Ken Calvert and others, all while preaching Christian family values, have been reported to have had illicit, extra-marital affairs.

With so many sinners leveling the charge of sinning at Bill Clinton, the impeachment crisis was truly an occasion in which, to quote *Teaching Mrs. Tingle* again, "facts" were "no longer relevant."

It all came down to who you liked and agreed with. If you thought Clinton was doing a good job and that most Republicans were hypocrites, you sided with the president. If you had hated Clinton from day one, his bad behavior with Lewinsky was just the evidence you needed to validate your long-standing belief. In toto, the situation was a morass in which it's not easy to determine "what's right anymore."

This is exactly the dilemma of Leigh Anne and her friends in this film. Is it right to hold a teacher hostage because she is engaged in a personal campaign of destruction?

In debating this question, *Teaching Mrs. Tingle* may be the ultimate "it depends on what the definition of 'is' is" horror movie. Ultimately, the movie comes down on the side of the bad-acting teens as the nation and the Congress ultimately came down on Clinton's side, perhaps because Tingle and the Republicans were ultimately so hypocritical and hateful.

It wasn't that Clinton got a pass for misdeeds; it was that he had made a terrible and stupid mistake (as Leigh Anne made a mistake getting involved with a cheat sheet). By contrast, there was no mistake at all in Republican or Tingle behavior. They were out to destroy their enemies no matter what and scandal was just an excuse to score political points.

In *Teaching Mrs. Tingle*, when Leigh Anne says to Mrs. Tingle, "You want to see me fail," she could have been speaking for the

Republican Congress and its view of President Clinton.

Almost a perfect metaphor for the issues of impeachment, *Teaching Mrs. Tingle* also finds a new way to apply writer and director Williamson's quippy, movie reference-style dialogue. In particular, it paints the picture of a generation gap. Here, the kids quote movies (like *The Exorcist*), while educated Mrs. Tingle quotes Shakespeare. It's a fun conceit, balancing movie history vs. the wisdom of the Bard, and Helen Mirren makes the most of her colorful, villainous role. Her Mrs. Tingle is a woman literally "tingling" with hate, with repressed rage. She's the one who believes she's the victim, and as a "gatekeeper" for the young, she intends to let no one else pass the test she failed (becoming something more than a bitter shrew).

It's very easy for horror fans to overlook the social commentary and interpersonal horror of a film like *Teaching Mrs. Tingle*. The cast is straight from the WB stable. The dialogue is occasionally too snarky for its own good. The movie is rated PG-13 instead of R, a bow to commercial interests.

But these qualities represent the vernacular of late-1990s horror movies. Quite a few of them can be dismissed on these grounds. But underneath the superficial qualities of the film (young, hip cast, namely) one sees that this horror film obsesses on the very things America was dealing with at the end of the century. Do we even know what right "is" anymore?

Virus *

Cast and Crew

CAST: Jamie Lee Curtis (Kit Foster); Donald Sutherland (Captain Everton); William Baldwin (Steve Baker); Joanna Pacula (Nadia); Marshall Bell (Woods).

CREW: Valhalla Motion Pictures Production. *Production Designer:* Mayling Chen. *Director of Photography:* David Eggby *Film Editor:* Scott Smith. *Music:* Joel McNeely. *Executive Producers:* Mike Richardson, Chuck Pfarrer, Mark Gordon, Gary Levinsohn. *Based on the Dark Horse Comic series by:* Chuck Pfarrer. *Written by:* Chuck Pfarrer and Dennis Feldman. *Directed by:* John Bruno. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 95 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: After surviving Typhoon Leiah, the barge *Sea Star* and her crew encounter a derelict Russian research vessel, the *Academik Vladislav Volkov*, in the South Pacific. Led by Captain Everton (Sutherland), the *Sea Star's* crew searches the ship in hopes of claiming salvage rights. They soon discover, however, that the Russian ship is infected by an alien intelligence transmitted from the *Mir*, in Earth orbit. The malevolent intelligence considers mankind a "virus" and has begun building an army out of spare machine and human parts. As the murderous cyborgs overrun the ship, navigator Foster (Curtis) and engineer Baker (Baldwin) realize that they must sink the ship before the assimilating alien can reach civilization.

COMMENTARY: A great horror cast including Donald Sutherland, Scream Queen Jamie Lee Curtis and genre vet Joanna Pacula is utterly wasted in the atrocious, disappointing *Virus*. Virtually everything about this by-the-numbers horror film is terribly underwhelming, from the mediocre special effects and creature design to the colorless direction. The result is a film that—if you'll pardon the pun—feels as mechanical and clunky as the film's inelegant robotic villains.

In 1989, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* introduced the Borg—a race of malevolent cyborgs—in the second season episode "Q-Who." These emotionless, scavenging aliens became so popular that they starred as the primary nemesis in 1996's blockbuster film franchise entry, *Star Trek: First Contact*. Well, suffice it to say that *Star Trek's* Borg, who nefariously and bloodily weld together human flesh and grinding metal, are much scarier in that family film than are the spare part antagonists of *Virus*.

These cyborgs barely seem ambulatory ... as though stagehands are pushing them along the floor, just out of frame.

It's difficult to pinpoint exactly where *Virus* goes off track, since catastrophic system failures occur on so many creative fronts simultaneously. First off, the film is visually unappealing: the entirety of the Russian ship looks like an underlit boiler room. The robots themselves look like halfhuman boiler room parts, so they blend in with the steel gray environs of the locale instead of standing separate and unique from them.

Secondly, the soundtrack is dominating by grinding gears and robot tools that sound like dentist drills. Not very appealing to listen to for an hour-and-a-half.

Third, the actors seem adrift. For the most part, they don't seem to gel with their characters, and worse, don't seem to like one another. When there's a brief flash of a romantic interest between William Baldwin's Baker and Curtis's Foster at the film's climax, it's a what-the-hell moment. You don't believe it for a second. The characters look like they've just met ... and hardly know each other. There's no chemistry whatsoever and the romantic overture is both obligatory and unnecessary.



Left to right: Steve Baker (William Baldwin), Nadia (Joanna Pacula), Hiko (Cliff Curtis) and Kit Foster (Jamie Lee Curtis) confront an alien cyborg in *Virus* (1999).

Other character motivations are also murky. The character named Richie, for instance, goes from being afraid of the robots to striking off on his own and conducting technical surgery on a short-range missile (and, conveniently, an ejector seat). Even Captain Everton, arguably the film's best drawn character, is all over the map in terms of motivation.

And then there's *Virus's* nagging inability to generate the slightest iota of tension or accelerate towards the climax with anything approximating flair. The survivors of the *Sea Star* elect to destroy the Russian ship (and their profit percentage in the salvage), and then do just that, with relative ease. There's no suspense or tension, just a flaccid trudging along until the movie mercifully ends. That the escape route from the ship is a weird ejector seat on a rocket doesn't help with the film's plausibility factor either.

Essentially *Moontrap* meets *Deep Rising* meets *The Astronaut's Wife*, *Virus* is shockingly, mind-numbingly awful. About the only positive thing I can say about *Virus* is that it's very gory, especially in the robot workroom scene involving Donald Sutherland's Captain Everton. There, you get a peek at all the cast-off and stitched together body parts, and you begin to sense how a cleverer movie could have played with the universal fear of dismemberment or botched surgery.

This is one *Virus* that isn't contagious. Thank God.

***Wishmaster 2: Evil Never Dies* * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Andrew Divoff (Djinn/Nathaniel Demarest); Paul Johansson (Gregory); Holly Fields (Morgann); Bokeem Woodbine (Farralon); Carlos Leon (Webber); Robert Lasardo (Gries); Oleg Vidov (Osip); Tommy Lister (Tillover); Chris Weber (Eric); Vyto Ruganis (Hosticka).

CREW: Artisan Entertainment presents a Jack Sholder Film. *CASTING:* Betsy Fels. *MUSIC:* David Williams. *SPECIAL MAKE-UP SPECIAL EFFECTS SUPERVISOR:* Anthony C. Ferrante. *COSTUME DESIGNER:* Laura Marolakos. *FILM EDITOR:* Michael Schwietzer. *PRODUCTION DESIGNER:* Alfred Sole. *DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:* Carlos Gonzalez. *LINE PRODUCER:* Lansing Parker. *PRODUCED BY:* Tony Amatullo. *BASED ON CHARACTERS CREATED BY:* Peter Atkins. *WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY:* Jack Sholder. *MPAA RATING:* R. *RUNNING TIME:* 96 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: During a failed museum heist, the Djinni's (Divoff) gem is released from entrapment in the Azura Mahzda statue. The Djinni escapes and sets about finding his benefactors, even though it means, initially, being arrested and sent to jail by the authorities. In jail, the evil Djinni sets about collecting the 1,000 souls he needs to bring his people into the human realm.

COMMENTARY: *Wishmaster 2* is one hell of a disappointment. The

first film in the franchise is, perhaps, but a rubber-reality guilty pleasure. Yet it's hard to argue that it wasn't, at the very least, entertaining. *Wishmaster 2: Evil Never Dies* is dull and interminable, and entirely lacking in the colorful, gory spectacle that made the 1997 movie a treat.

In *Wishmaster 2*, the Djinni, again assayed by Andrew Divoff, is freed from his jewel during a jail heist and then promptly tried and incarcerated. You read that right: the otherworldly Djinni is sent to Federal prison for the first portion of the film.

There, he interacts with other prisoners in an effort to nab 1,001 human souls. Unfortunately, by putting the Djinni in the company of tall, hulky, menacing convicts, Andrew Divoff just looks small and inconsequential by comparison. His sense of menace and power is sacrificed.

Narratively, I'm not certain about the point of this detour either. If the Djinni needs so many souls, how about visiting a local high school? The kids there are more gullible, and he can come and go as he pleases.

That's not the movie's only problem in logic. Early in the film, the Wishmaster grants the wish of a jewel thief, Eric, that he "was never born." We then see Eric revert to infancy and then into nothingness. Fine, but later Eric's girlfriend Morgana (Fields) still remembers him. How does she still possess a photograph of the guy, and even a single memory of him, if he *never* existed in the first place? Where'd the photo come from?

And don't even get me started on the fact that the Wishmaster grants bloody wishes on his nemeses here—freezing a police man, ripping a man apart in jail—and nobody really takes much notice. You'd think this kind of thing goes on every day.

Even the film's finale, set in a casino, is a mess. A roulette wheel turns into a spinning saw (courtesy of some terrible CGI), and *playing cards* perforate skin and execute people (instead of, you know, *bending on contact with human flesh*, like they do in real life). Even the film's last shot is silly: the Wishmaster apparently scaring off the cameraman, who shambles away in retreat.

I've focused here on the ways that *Wishmaster 2* fails to execute competently its not-so-good storyline. What seems more disturbing, however, is that the movie has lost the thread which could have given the franchise a sense of power (and a sense of terror). The monster's ability to manipulate us with our own wishes goes right to the core of human psychology and old sayings like "be careful what you wish for." But *Wishmaster 2* would rather wallow in stupid situations and bad

special effects than tell a story about human beings and the wishes they willingly make.

I wish they had made that movie instead of this one.

***Witchhouse* * (DTV)**

Cast and Crew

CAST: Matt Raftery (Jack); Ashley McKinney (Elizabeth Le Fay); Monica Serene Garnich (Jennifer Bainbridge); Brooke Mueller (Janet); Dave Oren Ward (Tony); Marissa Tait (Marla); Dane Northcutt (Scott); Kimberly Pullis (Margaret); Jason Faunt (Bob); Ryan Scott Greene (Brad); Ariauna Albright (Lilith).

CREW: Full Moon Pictures Presents a Jack Reed Film. *Casting:* Robert MacDonald, Perry Bullington. *Prosthetic Effects:* Christopher Bergshneider, Jeffrey S. Farley. *Special Visual Effects:* John R. Ellis, David Lange. *Production Designer:* Raud Corciora. *Music:* Jared De Pasquale. *Film Editor:* Harry James Picardi. *Director of Photography:* Viorel Sergovici, Jr. *Original Story by:* Charles Band. *Written by:* Matthew Jason Walsh. *Produced by:* Vlad Paunescu, Kirk Edward Hansen. *Executive Producer:* Charles Band. *Directed by:* Jack Reed. *MPAA Rating:* R. *Running time:* 72 minutes.

SYNOPSIS: A group of college students attend a party in Dunwich's famous witchhouse. The hostess for the evening is Elizabeth Le Fay (McKinney), a woman who hopes to take revenge for the death of witch ancestor, Lilith (Albright), by killing the descendents of those who burned her at the stake three centuries earlier. The college students in attendance, including applied sciences major Jack (Raftery), are the descendents, and very soon Lilith and Elizabeth are picking them off. Another attendee of the party, Jennifer Bainbridge (Garnich), has a secret of her own.

COMMENTARY: Eek. Only one more Full Moon direct-to-video feature to review before we leave the 1990s and the Clinton Era

behind.

And sadly *Witchouse* is pretty lame, even by Full Moon's low standards. Here, a 300-year-old witch, Lilith, goes after the descendants of those who burned her at the stake. One of her sympathetic descendants invites them all over to a party, and for some reason they all accept. Then Lilith materializes and chases this young adult crowd around a picturesque house, firing lightning bolts out of her hands, willy-nilly. Lightning bolts which can, incidentally, be repelled by mirrors and crucifixes.

The key to stopping this villain involves a resourceful science major who skillfully uses knob and-tube wiring to electrocute Lilith. And there's a surprise revelation at the end of the film, too, involving the character named Jennifer Bainbridge. Like the rest of the movie, this revelation makes absolutely no sense, especially since Jennifer would have had to know what Lilith was planning before attending her party.

And how is it that all the descendants of Lilith's murderers know each other anyway? In three hundred years, not a single family moved out of town? And all the ancestors are twenty-somethings in 1999? And all their parents are dead, too? (I mean, why not kill the whole clan while you're at it, Lilith, instead of just the college-age offenders, right?)

Did I mention that the imperiled, off-theshelf, interchangeable youngsters banter in clichéd, smart-aleck, post-*Scream* fashion, dropping horror movie titles like *Frankenstein* and *The Exorcist*? Or that a boom mic dips into plain view on at least four separate occasions? It's all pretty terrible, unless you're playing a drinking game.

Kind of a sad note to go out on, really, but at least *Witchouse* is short: a meager 72 minutes. Four dipping boom mics and we're outta there.

Oh, and somehow this movie spawned two sequels, if you can believe such a thing: *Witchouse II: Blood Coven* (2000) and *Witchouse 3: Demon Fire* (2001).

But that, my friends, is a tale for another decade of horror movies and another book.

I'll be back...

IV

Conclusion— A New Century Dawns

The 1990s ended with a whimper. President Clinton kept his job, not to mention his high approval ratings. His party, the Democrats, actually gained seats in the final mid-term of his presidency (1998), a response, in part, to the witchhunt and high-handed tactics of his hypocritical opponents.

Tellingly, Kenneth Starr, the Inspector Javert of the 1990s, found no evidence of wrongdoing by either Clinton in Travelgate, Whitewater, Filegate or any other 1990s "gates" for that matter. Forty million dollars in taxpayer money had been spent tilting at windmills.

Even more miraculously, the modern world did not end at Y2K, on December 31, 1999. Instead, the Earth just kept right on spinning, uninterrupted. As the new century and millennium commenced, the Internet expanded with popular social networking sites (with names like MySpace, Facebook and Twitter), and old-fashioned print books faced a challenge from electronic readers like Amazon's "Kindle." A video clip site, YouTube, also captured the attention of the nation. Even film criticism changed: an aggregator called "Rotten Tomatoes" gathered critiques from across the Internet and scored movies as "fresh" or "rotten."

But despite such technological advances and a much more "connected" world, storm clouds gathered quickly in the 2000s. The first presidential election of the 21st century, between Al Gore and George W. Bush, ended in a contentious draw, and was resolved not in the Electoral College ... but in the Supreme Court of the United States.

Then, a scant eight months after controversial "compassionate conservative" George W. Bush took office, America suffered the worst terrorist attack on its soil in its long history on September 11, 2001. The Twin Towers in Manhattan were destroyed by Islamic fanatics, and the Pentagon was struck by a kamikaze airliner.

This catastrophic attack—the work of an Islamic terrorist group

called "al-Qaeda"—was just the beginning of perhaps the most turbulent decade in America's modern history. Suddenly, nobody had the time or the energy to focus on imaginary government conspiracies or secret illuminati. Suddenly, the aliens of *The X-Files* and the demonic foes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* looked like relics from a bygone age. Such genre TV heroes were promptly replaced by torture-loving nationalist warriors like *24*'s (2001–2010) Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) and international secret agents such as Sidney Bristow (Jennifer Garner) on *Alias* (2001–2005).

After years of "peace and prosperity," suddenly America seemed enmeshed in a live-or-die battle of civilizations, and the entertainment of the times reflected this conflict.

And the decade wasn't over, either. In fact, it had just begun.

An American war in Iraq waged on largely false pretenses soon followed a war in Afghanistan, and lasted for year after bloody year, long after public support for it dropped precipitously. A hurricane named Katrina drowned an American city, New Orleans, in 2005. And in September 2008—just before a new president was to be elected—the American economy suffered the worst collapse since the Great Depression in the 1930s.





The 21st century brought a return of John Carpenter with *Ghosts of Mars* (2001), which opened just two weeks before the attacks of September 11, 2001. *Top:* Desolation Williams (Ice Cube, left), Jericho (Jason Statham, center) and Bashira (Clea Duvall) contemplate a Martian enemy. *Bottom:* *Species* star Natasha Henstridge plays tough guy Lt. Melanie Ballard.

But recall our edict: "Bad times make for good horror movies."

In a decade of war, recession, natural disaster, financial ruin and contentious party politics, horror movies made a colossal come-back in terms of quality and box office, especially in the latter half of the 2000s.

The year 2009, in particular, was a new renaissance in the genre, offering critically acclaimed titles such as *Drag Me to Hell* (2009), *Zombieland* (2009), *Orphan* (2009), *Carriers* (2009), *Antichrist* (2009), and *Pandorum* (2009).

With a rerun president in George Bush, Jr., genre movies often looked to the past for inspiration, and Hollywood remade virtually every genre classic imaginable. Titles of a few "re-imaginings" included *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Dawn of the Dead* (2004), *Omen 666* (2006), *Halloween* (2007), *Last House on the Left* (2009) and *Friday the 13th* (2009).

But the most popular monster of the 2000s was undeniably *the*

zombie— a creature depicted as both a symptom and cause of societal breakdown, bureaucratic failure, and, finally, apocalypse.

Zombies (or zombie-like creatures) appeared in films as diverse as *28 Days Later* (2002), George A. Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2004) and *Zombieland* (2009). The nineties trademark "human" monsters—serial killers and interlopers—were out and civilization-ending, flesh-eating ghouls were suddenly in fashion.

Other trends in the 2000s included Japanese horror remakes such as *The Ring* (2002), *The Grudge* (2004), *Pulse* (2005) and *One Missed Call* (2006), and all these titles seemed to evidence a fear of modern technology (like cell phones), or mused on the notion of a mass media transmitting human suffering instantaneously across the globe. Technology also played an important role behind the scenes, with CG coming, finally, to replace virtually all the old-fashioned practical effects of Hollywood's yesteryear. In George Romero's *Diary of the Dead*, for instance, CGI blood spurts finally (and controversially) replaced old fashioned blood floods.

But it wasn't long before horror fans realized they were experiencing a renaissance in their favorite genre, and consequently the 1990s seemed to become the decade that never was. Few Clinton Age titles, beyond *Scream* (1996) and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), were hauled out for re-examination or plaudits.

Even as horror bloggers proliferated on the Net—offering a whole new arena for commentary on films of all decades, the nineties by-and-large remained the genre's red-headed stepchildren.

For over a decade now, this fact has not changed. But perhaps, in closing, we should remember the words of Bill Clinton, slightly altered in this context.

There was nothing wrong with the horror films of the 1990s that couldn't be fixed by what was right with them.

In other words, the troubled decade also saw its share of triumphs and pioneers. And even if those accomplishments are eclipsed by the highpoints of other decades, the Roaring Nineties remains forever the bridge to our 21st century horrors, the first steps beyond Reagan and yuppieism, and the last age of innocence, perhaps, before real-life terror took a firm hold on America's rattled psyche.

The best in the genre— *or was it the worst?*— was yet to come.

Appendix A:

1990s Horror Conventions

In the 1990s, several specific clichés and themes were repeated across a wide array of horror films. In the decade of Clinton, these scenarios eventually became as familiar (and perhaps as dreaded) as dance trends like the Macarena and the Lambada.

Below, assembled in no particular order, are all your old favorite tropes from the era of Trapper Keepers, giga-pets, Julius Caesar haircuts and Koosh balls. For a convention to appear below, it must have recurred at least three times during the 1990s.

The Stay Awake

This is the number one cliché of the 1990s: the trademark after-the-nightmare shot in which a beleaguered protagonist awakes (usually in bed) and is depicted in close-up, all sweaty and bothered. This cliché is named for the terrible 1987 film *The Stay Awake*, and although it was used widely in rubber reality films of the 1980s, the convention was co-opted by all forms of horror in the 1990s, usually to add a "jolt" during a slow-point in the narrative.

Baby Blood (1990)

Blue Steel (1990)

Def by Temptation (1990)

Demonia (1990)

The First Power (1990)

Jacob's Ladder (1990)

Mr. Frost (1990)

Pacific Heights (1990)
Syngenor (1990)
Two Evil Eyes (1990)
X-tro 2: The Second Encounter (1990)
Blood Massacre (1991)
The Boneyard (1991)
The Dark Half (1991)
Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare (1991)
Haunting Fear (1991)
The Masque of Red Death (1991)
Popcorn (1991)
The Unborn (1991)
Dr. Giggles (1992)
Dust Devil (1992)
The Gate II (1992)
Hellraiser 3: Hell on Earth (1992)
The Lawnmower Man (1992)
976-Evil 2: The Astral Factor (1992)
Pet Sematary 2 (1992)
Raising Cain (1992)
The Resurrected (1992)
The Runestone (1992)
Split Second (1992)
Amityville: A New Generation (1993)
Ghost in the Machine (1993)
The Unnamable II (1993)
Brainscan (1994)
Night of the Demons 2 (1994)
Children of the Corn III: Urban Harvest (1995)
Candyman 2: Farewell to the Flesh (1995)
Castle Freak (1995)
Embrace of the Vampire (1995)

Haunted (1995)
Hideaway (1995)
Pumpkinhead II: Blood Wings (1994)
The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation (1994)
Jack-O (1995)
Sleepstalker: The Sandman's Last Rites (1995)
Witchboard: The Possession (1995)
Bad Moon (1996)
Children of the Corn IV: The Gathering (1996)
The Craft (1996)
The Ghost and the Darkness (1996)
Mary Reilly (1996)
The Sandman (1996)
Thinner (1996)
The Devil's Advocate (1997)
The Night Flier (1997)
The Vampire Journals (1997)
Wes Craven Presents Wishmaster (1997)
Wishmaster 2: Evil Never Dies (1999)
Disturbing Behavior (1998)
I Still Know What You Did Last Summer (1998)
Phantasm IV: Oblivion (1998)
The Astronaut's Wife (1999)
The Coroner (1999)
End of Days (1999)
In Dreams (1999)
The Rage: Carrie 2 (1999)
Shikoku (1999)
Stir of Echoes (1999)
Virus (1999)
Wishmaster 2: Evil Never Dies (1999)

Breast Part of the Movie

The most common shot of 1980s horror is still around in the 1990s: the view of a young, nubile female removing her blouse and bra for the camera. To be included in this category, at least one breast (including nipple) must be displayed. (This cliché was named in honor of my friend and father-in-law, Dr. Frank Leftwich, who coined the term and who passed away in 2010).

Baby Blood (1990)

A Cat in the Brain (1990)

Demonia (1990)

Fear (1990)

The Haunting of Morella (1990)

Luther the Geek (1990)

Maniac Cop 2 (1990)

Mister Frost (1990)

Syngenor (1990)

Haunting Fear (1991)

Puppet Master 2 (1991)

The Unborn (1991)

Amityville: It's About Time (1992)

Highway to Hell (1992)

Jennifer 8 (1992)

Netherworld (1992)

Pet Sematary 2 (1992)

Prom Night IV: Deliver Us from Evil (1992)

Split Second (1992)

Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me (1992)

Jason Goes to Hell (1993)

Phantasm III: Lord of the Dead (1993)

Return of the Living Dead 3 (1993)

Subspecies 2: Bloodstone (1993)

Brainscan (1994)

Dario Argento's Trauma (1994)

Leprechaun 2 (1994)
Nightwatch (1994)
Subspecies 3: Bloodlust (1994)
Castle Freak (1995)
Embrace of the Vampire (1995)
The Girl with the Hungry Eyes (1995)
Haunted (1995)
Jack-O (1995)
Lord of Illusions (1995)
Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight (1995)
Bad Moon (1996)
Cemetery Man (1996)
The Dentist (1996)
Pinocchio's Revenge (1996)
Amityville Dollhouse (1997)
The Devil's Advocate (1997)
Lost Highway (1997)
Poison Ivy 3: The New Seduction (1997)
Tales from the Crypt: Bordello of Blood (1997)
The Ugly (1997)
Devil in the Flesh (1998)
Die Hard Dracula (1998)
Disturbing Behavior (1998)
The Prophecy 2 (1998)
Subspecies 4: Bloodstorm (1998)
From Dusk Till Dawn 2: Texas Blood Money (1999)
The House on Haunted Hill (1999)
Immortality (1999)
The Ninth Gate (1999)

Aliens

The 1990s brought all varieties of evil alien invaders, more so, in fact,

than any decade since the 1950s. In the Age of Mentos, fanny packs and Pogs, aliens came to Earth to hunt (*Predator 2*), to mate (*Species; Species 2*), to colonize (*Body Snatchers*, *X-Files: Fight the Future*), invade (*The Puppet Masters*), abduct humans (*Fire in the Sky*), speed-up global warming (*The Arrival*) and for other nefarious purposes.

Predator 2 (1990)

Xtro 2: The Second Encounter (1990)

Alien³ (1992)

Fire in the Sky (1993)

Body Snatchers (1994)

The Puppet Masters (1994)

Species (1995)

X-Tro 3: Watch the Skies (1995)

The Arrival (1996)

Alien Resurrection (1997)

The Second Arrival (1998)

Species 2 (1998)

The X-Files: Fight the Future (1998)

The Astronaut's Wife (1999)

Virus (1999)

Ambulance Ending

The preferred final scene of 1990s horror films involves shattered, traumatized heroes/ survivors (often bandaged), after a conflict with a "monster" (usually a serial killer). In the background is an ambulance, EMT workers, and the flashing red lights of the vehicle.

Fear (1990)

Ghost in the Machine (1993)

Wolf (1994)

The Sandman (1996)

Scream (1996)

Nightwatch (1998)

Anthologies

The short story "horror" anthology film experienced re-birth in the 1990s, with some unusual results. The subject matter included the Old West (*Grim Prairie Tales*), urban legends (*Campfire Tales*), and the works of famous authors including Poe (*Two Evil Eyes*) and Lovecraft (*Necronomicon: Book of the Dead*).

Grim Prairie Tales (1990)

Tales from the Darkside: The Movie (1990)

Campfire Tales (1991)

Two Evil Eyes (1991)

Tales from the Hood (1995)

Necronomicon: Book of the Dead (1996)

Campfire Tales (1997)

The Autopsy

In 1990s horror cinema, the autopsy frequently became a crucial plot point, carrying the information that the hero would need to defeat the villain or uncover the identity of a killer. And for some reason, in a lot of these autopsy scenes, the coroner is depicted eating, and usually eating sloppily.

The Boneyard (1991)

The Silence of the Lambs (1991)

Alien³ (1992)

Innocent Blood (1992)

Carnosaur (1993)

Wes Craven's New Nightmare (1994)

The Prophecy (1995)

The Prophecy 2 (1998)

The X-Files: Fight the Future (1998)

Lake Placid (1999)

Big (Bad) Business

Corporations were portrayed as villains in a number of 1990s horror films, suggesting that the bottom line is too often prioritized over ethics and human life.

Eunice Corp (*Brain Dead* [1990], *Carnosaur*)

Norton-Cyberdyne (Syngenor [1990])

Cyberdyne Systems (*Terminator 2: Judgment Day* [1991])

Weyland-Yutani (*Alien 3* [1992])

Biotech (*Puppet Master 4: The Demon* [1991], *Puppet Master 5* [1994])

GenCo (*Wes Craven Presents Mind-Ripper* [1995])

InGen (*Jurassic Park* [1993], *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* [1997])

Bio-Hazard Suits

If a hockey mask and finger knives were the apparel of the slasher paradigm in the 1980s, the bio-hazard suit became the required gear of 1990s horror films. These suits with their big, domed helmets protected heroic movie characters from giant bugs (*Mimic*), underwater menaces (*Sphere*), alien contagion (*X-Files: Fight the Future*) and even Ebola (*Outbreak*).

Carnosaur (1993)

Return of the Living Dead III (1993)

The Puppet Masters (1994)

Outbreak (1995)

Mimic (1998)

Phantoms (1998)

Sphere (1998)

Tale of the Mummy (1998)

X-Files: Fight the Future (1998)

Blood Message

Serial killers, cultists and other villains were constantly leaving behind warnings and messages written in blood in horror films of the 1990s.

"Fear Me!"— *Fear* (1990)

"I'm Back!"— *Split Second* (1992)

"We will have the child!"— *Children of the Corn IV: The Gathering* (1996)

"Get out or die!"— *Children of the Corn 666: Isaac's Return* (1999)

"He's coming!"— *Resurrection* (1999)

The Car Won't Start

Automobiles in horror films of the 1990s prove to be utterly unreliable. Cars should offer a handy method of escape for protagonist, but oftentimes for no reason at all, simply fail to start.

A Cat in the Brain (1990)

Leatherface (1990)

Luther the Geek (1990)

Night of the Living Dead (1990)

Prom Night 3: The Last Kiss (1990)

Puppet Master 4: The Demon (1991)

Children of the Corn II: The Final Sacrifice (1992)

Leprechaun (1992)

Sleepwalkers (1992)

Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday (1993)

Urban Legend (1996)

Breakdown (1997)

Night of the Demons 3 (1997)

Children of the Corn V: Fields of Terror (1998)

Phantoms (1998)

The Carnival/Amusement Park

A carnival is a society unto itself, down to its unusual population of carnies. There are rules to obey and visitors don't always understand them. A number of 1990s horror films are set at, or feature sequences set at, carnival and circuses.

Baby Blood (1990)

Fear (1990)

Alligator 2: The Mutation (1991)

Child's Play 3: Look Who's Stalking (1991)

Sleeping with the Enemy (1991)

Dr. Giggles (1992)

Thinner (1996)

Death Mask (1998)

The Cat Jump

One of the most popular of all horror movie jolts, the cat jump, relies on the sudden appearance of a (usually screeching) cat. The unexpected appearance terrorizes a lone person searching a dark corner.

Demonia (1990)

The Haunting of Morella (1990)

Shakma (1990)

The Masque of Red Death (1991)

The Unborn (1991)

Dolly Dearest (1992)

Pet Sematary 2 (1992)

Sleepwalkers (1992)

Castle Freak (1995)

Switchback (1997)

Tales from the Crypt: Bordello of Blood (1997)

End of Days (1999)

Conspiracies

Thanks to an empowered and rabid right wing, which manufactured every kind of rumor about Bill Clinton imaginable (he was a rapist, a murderer, a drug-trafficker, a communist, a homosexual, etc.), the 1990s became the decade of dark conspiracies. Many conspiracies

involved aliens (*The X-Files: Fight the Future*, *The Arrival*, etc.), but films as diverse and earthbound as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation*, about an illuminati preying on the weak, and *Eyes Wide Shut*, about a cabal of the sinister "have mores" posited dangerous conspiracies lurking in America's shadows. Sometimes they manifested as Satanists (*The Ninth Gate*), sometimes they were Druids (*The Curse of Michael Myers*), and sometimes they were vampires (*Blade*).

The Ambulance (1990)

La Setta (1991)

The Unborn (1991)

Children of the Corn II: The Final Sacrifice (1992)

The Runestone (1992)

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation (1994)

Halloween VI: The Curse of Michael Myers (1995)

Outbreak (1995)

X-Tro 3: Watch the Skies (1995)

The Arrival (1996)

Blade (1998)

Disturbing Behavior (1998)

John Carpenter's Vampires (1998)

The X-Files: Fight the Future (1998)

End of Days (1999)

Eyes Wide Shut (1999)

The Ninth Gate (1999)

Sleepy Hollow (1999)

Stigmata (1999)

Stir of Echoes (1999)

Crucifix Pose

The decade of Nirvana, Pearl Jam and Nine Inch Nails was also the decade, for some reason, in which the Crucifixion was mirrored by horror movies. The crucifix pose was Ripley's pose when she sacrificed her life for humanity's sins in Fincher's *Alien3*, for instance, but it was

also a posture mockingly demonstrated by Pinhead in *Hellraiser 3: Hell on Earth*.

La Setta (1991)

Alien 3 (1992)

Hellraiser 3: Hell on Earth (1992)

976-Evil 2: The Astral Factor (1992)

The Devil's Advocate (1997)

Devils and Demons

With the end of the Millennium on the horizon, the horror films of the 1990s often involved Satan or his demonic minions. The Devil either wanted to conceive a child (*La Setta*, *End of Days*), bring his child into the family business (*Devil's Advocate*) or sow discontent on Earth (*Needful Things*).

The Exorcist III (1990)

La Setta (1991)

The Demon Possessed (1992)

The Gate II (1992)

Highway to Hell (1992)

Needful Things (1992)

The Prophecy (1995)

The Devil's Advocate (1997)

The Prophecy 2 (1998)

The End of Days (1999)

The Ninth Gate (1999)

Don't Ask, Don't Tell: The Gay Friend

The 1990s represented an era of real social change in horror films, with women's rights, race relations and gay rights becoming part of the regular tapestry of the genre. Many films from the 1990s featured the character of the "gay friend," a supporting character who was overtly homosexual. Usually, the gay friend died before the movie ended.

Single White Female (1991)

Copycat (1995)

Bride of Chucky (1998)

The Shivers (1999)

Druids

Druids and Druid cults played a part in a few horror films, oddly enough. In one instance, the Druids were saviors (*Warlock: The Armageddon*). In another, they were villains (*The Guardian*).

The Guardian (1990)

Warlock: The Armageddon (1993)

Halloween VI: The Curse of Michael Myers (1995)

Grim Fairy Tales

These were the horror films of the 1990s that took folkloric entities and monsters and revamped them as modern horrors in contemporary society. In most cases the mythic literature from which these creatures sprang also held the key to destroying them.

The Runestone (1992)

Leprechaun (1993)

Pumpkinhead II: Blood Wings (1994)

The Ice Cream Man (1995)

Rumpelstiltskin (1995)

Sleepstalker: The Sandman's Last Rites (1995)

Jack-O (1996)

Pinocchio's Revenge (1996)

The Sandman (1996)

Jack Frost (1997)

Snow White: A Tale of Terror (1997)

Wes Craven Presents Wishmaster (1997)

Uncle Sam (1998)

The Gulf War

Operation Desert Storm occurred in 1991, and footage from the "high tech" war in Iraq soon appeared in horror movies of the decade.

The People Under the Stairs (1991)

The Silence of the Lambs (1991)

The Lawnmower Man (1992)

Holy Water Pistols

Following in the footsteps of *The Lost Boys* (1987), at least three films in the 1990s climaxed with characters using water pistols filled with holy water to combat the forces of evil.

Night of the Demons 2 (1994)

From Dusk Till Dawn (1996)

Tales from the Crypt: Bordello of Blood (1997)

H.P. Lovecraft

Another of the most adapted authors of the 1990s was H.P. Lovecraft. Ironically, the best Lovecraft-styled film of the decade was one not based on his works: John Carpenter's *In The Mouth of Madness*.

Bride of the Re-Animator (1990)

The Resurrected (1992)

The Unnamable 2 (1993)

Lurking Fear (1994)

Necronomicon: Book of the Dead (1996)

Interlopers

One of the most popular "monsters" of the 1990s was the usurping interloper, the dangerous individual who insinuated himself into the life of a victim.

Blue Steel (1990)

The Guardian (1990)

Misery (1990)

Pacific Heights (1990)

Single White Female (1991)

Sleeping with the Enemy (1991)

The Hand That Rocks the Cradle (1992)

Poison Ivy (1992)

Man's Best Friend (1993)

Mother's Boys (1994)

The Fan (1996)

Poison Ivy 3: The New Seduction (1997)

Devil in the Flesh (1998)

Wicked (1998)

The Internet of Doom (ReplacesLibrary of Doom)

The 1990s brought the Internet to horror movies not only as a vehicle for terror, but also a vehicle for research. Accordingly, the Internet search supplanted the old cliché of the 1970s/ 1980s of library research.

Copycat (1995)

Campfire Tales (1997)

I Know What You Did Last Summer (1997)

Fallen (1998)

The Last Broadcast (1998)

Wishmaster 2: Evil Never Dies (1999)

Killers with Nicknames

Almost all serial killers had nicknames in the 1990s serial killer milieu.

"The Shadowman," *Fear* (1990)

"Buffalo Bill," *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991)

"Hannibal the Cannibal," *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991)

"The Head Hunter," *Dario Argento's Trauma* (1994)

"Casanova," *Kiss the Girls* (1997)

"The Numbers Killer," *Resurrection* (1999)

Let's Go Out to the Lobby: Horror in the Auditorium

Since the 1990s was the decade of movies within movies, it's only fitting that many horror films of the decade involved terrors actually set inside movie theaters.

Popcorn (1991)

In The Mouth of Madness (1995)

Outbreak (1995)

Scream 2 (1997)

Monsters

The new age of CGI brought a multitude of giant monsters to the cineplexes in the 1990s. They came from the sea (*Deep Rising*), Africa (*The Relic*), the Amazon (*Anaconda*), prehistory (*Jurassic Park*, *Carnosaur*), and even underground (*Tremors*).

Nightbreed (1990)

Tremors (1990)

The Runestone (1992)

Carnosaur (1993)

Jurassic Park (1993)

The Ghost and the Darkness (1996)

Tremors 2: Aftershocks (1996)

The Lost World: Jurassic Park (1997)

Anaconda (1997)

The Relic (1997)

Deep Rising (1998)

Godzilla (1998)

Bats (1999)

Deep Blue Sea (1999)

Lake Placid (1999)

The Newspaper Clippings Drawer/ Shrine

Serial killers and other 1990s villains often hoard clippings from newspapers regarding their exploits, crimes and even targets.

Basic Instinct (1992)

Jennifer 8 (1992)

Copycat (1995)

Se7en (1995)

Kiss the Girls (1997)

Switchback (1997)

The Ugly (1998)

The Police Procedural

The most tiresome and overused format of horror films of the 1990s is the police procedural, the investigation by law enforcement officials of a crime. The police procedural format was used not just in interloper and serial killer dramas, but also in supernatural films like *Fallen*.

The Exorcist III (1990)

Fear (1990)

The First Power (1990)

The Boneyard (1991)

Basic Instinct (1992)

Innocent Blood (1992)

Jennifer 8 (1992)

Needful Things (1992)

The Runestone (1992)

Split Second (1992)

Blink (1994)

Castle Freak (1995)

Copycat (1995)
Se7en (1995)
Sleepstalker: The Sandman's Last Rites (1995)
The Dentist (1996)
The Prophecy (1997)
Kiss the Girls (1997)
Switchback (1997)
Fallen (1998)
Psycho Sisters (1998)
Tale of the Mummy (1998)
Wicked (1998)
The Bone Collector (1999)
Immortality (1999)
Resurrection (1999)

Remakes

In Hollywood, everything old can be made new again. Especially in the horror genre, which since 1990 has seen its most popular and wellknown titles remade.

Night of the Living Dead (1990)
Cape Fear (1991)
The Vanishing (1993)
Village of the Damned (1995)
The Island of Dr. Moreau (1996)
Diabolique (1996)
Godzilla (1998)
Nightwatch (1998)
Psycho (1998)
Wes Craven Presents Carnival of Souls (1998)
The Haunting (1999)
The House on Haunted Hill (1999)

Science Run Amok

Dr. Frankenstein, meet the 1990s. In these films, scientist took noble intentions and new inventions to a new level of terror. Gene therapy (*Jurassic Park*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*), virtual reality (*The Lawnmower Man*) and even the VChip (*Disturbing Behavior*) provided fodder for horrors in the epoch of Giga-Pets, Furbies and Beanie Babies.

Brain Dead (1990)

Bride of Re-Animator (1990)

Flatliners (1990)

Frankenstein Unbound (1990)

Hardware (1990)

Syngenor (1990)

Eve of Destruction (1991)

The Unborn (1991)

The Lawnmower Man (1992)

Carnosaur (1993)

Jurassic Park (1993)

Man's Best Friend (1993)

Puppet Master 4: The Demon (1993)

Return of the Living Dead III (1993)

Brainscan (1994)

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1994)

The Unborn 2 (1994)

Halloween VI: The Curse of Michael Myers (1995)

Hideaway (1995)

Species (1995)

Virtuosity (1995)

The Island of Dr. Moreau (1996)

Screamers (1996)

Disturbing Behavior (1998)

Mimic (1998)

Bats (1999)

Deep Blue Sea (1999)

Serial Killers

The serial killer replaced the slasher as the cinema's most popular boogeyman in the 1990s, bringing along with him the police procedural milieu and the methodology for his destruction: forensic pathology.

The Exorcist III (1990)

Fear (1990)

The First Power (1990)

Silence of the Lambs (1991)

Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me (1992)

Jennifer 8 (1992)

976-Evil 2: The Astral Factor (1992)

Split Second (1992)

Ghost in the Machine (1993)

The Vanishing (1993)

Dario Argento's Trauma (1994)

Copycat (1995)

Se7en (1995)

Sleepstalker: The Sandman's Last Rites (1995)

Virtuosity (1995)

Pinocchio's Revenge (1996)

Kiss the Girls (1997)

The Ugly (1997)

Switchback (1997)

Nightwatch (1998)

The Bone Collector (1999)

The Coroner (1999)

The Fear: Halloween Night (1999)

In Dreams (1999)

Resurrection (1999)

Stephen King

The King of Horror, Stephen King, saw several of his short stories, novels and even a screenplay adapted to film during the 1990s. The decade gave King one of his finest adaptation ever (*Misery*) and one of the worst (*The Mangler*).

Graveyard Shift (1990)

Misery (1990)

The Dark Half (1991)

The Lawnmower Man (1992)

Needful Things (1992)

Sleepwalkers (1992)

The Mangler (1995)

Thinner (1996)

Tabloid Culture

In keeping with the popularity of *The Jerry Springer Show* and *America's Most Wanted*, an abundance of 1990s horrors featured characters and situations relating to tabloid television and tabloid newspapers.

Basket Case 2 (1990): Judge and Jury, "America's Bravest Newspaper"

Fear (1990): Daybreak America

Maniac Cop 2 (1990): "Criminals at Large"

Predator 2 (1990): Tony Pope (Morton Downey Jr.) of Hard Core

Jason Goes to Hell (1991): Robert Campbell (Steven Culp) of
America's Case Files

Children of the Corn II: The Final Sacrifice (1993); Terence Knox, John
Garrett of The World Inquirer

The Crush (1993): Pique Magazine

Natural Born Killers (1994) Wayne Gale (Robert Downey, Jr.) of
American Maniac

Leprechaun 2 (1994): Current Event

Relative Fear (1994): The National Murder Network

Copycat (1995): LawTV

Virtuosity (1995): As It Happened

The Sandman (1996): Gerald Rivers (James L. Edwards) of the Gerald Rivers Show.

The Night Flier (1997): Richard Dees (Miguel Ferrer) of Inside View Magazine

Scream 2 (1997): Gale Weathers (Courtney Cox) of Current Edition

The House on Haunted Hill (1999): Peter Graves (Himself) hosting "Terrifying but True."

Resurrection (1999): "Today's Crime"

Vampires

The children of the night underwent massive changes in the 1990s, becoming symbols of romance (*Bram Stoker's Dracula*, *Interview with a Vampire*, *To Sleep with a Vampire*), as well as figures of fun (*Sundown*, *Innocent Blood*, *A Vampire in Brooklyn*). Towards the end of the decade, the vampire and action genres mixed, to impressive results, in films such as *From Dusk Till Dawn*, *Blade* and *John Carpenter's Vampires*.

Children of the Night (1991)

Sundown: The Vampire in Retreat (1991)

Bram Stoker's Dracula (1992)

Innocent Blood (1992)

Subspecies (1992)

To Sleep with a Vampire (1993)

The Addiction (1995)

Embrace of the Vampire (1995)

The Girl with the Hungry Eyes (1995)

A Vampire in Brooklyn (1995)

From Dusk Till Dawn (1996)

Vampire Journals (1997)

Blade (1998)

Die Hard Dracula (1998)

John Carpenter's Vampires (1998)

From Dusk Till Dawn 2: Texas Blood Money (1999)

Immortality (1999)

The Video Camera

The home video camera became one of the most important tools in the arsenal of 1990s horror films. It was used to expose crimes (*Man's Best Friend*), record history in the making (*Flatliners*), and even represent the up-to-date equivalent of a "last known photograph" (*The Blair Witch Project*).

Flatliners (1990)

Mr. Frost (1990)

Puppet Master 2 (1991)

Basket Case 3: Progeny (1992)

Prom Night IV: Deliver us from Evil (1992)

Maniac Cop 3 (1993)

Man's Best Friend (1993)

Brainscan (1994)

Tremors 2: After-Shocks (1995)

Scream (1996)

Anaconda (1997)

Lost Highway (1997)

Scream 2 (1997)

The Last Broadcast (1998)

Ringu (1998)

The Blair Witch Project (1999)

The House on Haunted Hill (1999)

The Rage: Carrie 2 (1999)

Virtual Reality

Also featured in such mainstream films as *Disclosure* (1994), virtual reality was a concept popularized in horror films of the 1990s. Virtual reality became a realm of terror in *The Lawnmower Man*. In one movie, a virtual serial killer even threatened a real-life city (*Virtuosity*).

The Lawnmower Man (1992)

Ghost in the Machine (1993)

Brainscan (1994)

Virtuosity (1995)

The Writing Life

Many 1990s horror films were self-reflexive, and looked in the mirrors, at writers in particular. Some films adopted writers as their protagonists (*Misery*, *The Dark Half*), while others featured writers as serial killers (*Basic Instinct*) and even demonic entities (*In The Mouth of Madness*).

Misery (1990)

The Dark Half (1991)

Basic Instinct (1992)

Children of the Corn II: The Final Sacrifice (1993)

Kalifornia (1993)

Wolf (1994)

In The Mouth of Madness (1995)

The Sandman (1996)

What's on TV: The Boob Tube

As the self-reflexive decade of horror films, the 1990s offered several horror films that referenced other films. One way for a director to pay "homage" to a classic was to feature footage of the older movie on the television.

Campfire Tales (1991): *The Terror* (1961)

Campfire Tales (1991): *Reefer Madness* (1936)

Campfire Tales (1991): *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)

976-Evil 2 (1991): *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)

976-Evil 2 (1991): *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946)

Basic Instinct (1992): *Hellraiser* (1987)

Scream (1996): *Halloween* (1978)

Bride of Chucky (1998): *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935)

Halloween H20 (1998): *Scream 2* (1997)

Appendix B:

The 1990s Horror Hall of Fame

In the 1990s, horror movies went from being considered "B" properties by many Hollywood studios to full-fledged "A" properties. This shift meant that suddenly horror movies had access not merely to bigger budgets, but to bigger, more mainstream movie stars too. That's why you'll find names like Johnny Depp and Julia Roberts included in this 1990s "horror hall of fame."

To be included here, a performer must have appeared in at least three genre films during the decade.

Ian Abercrombie *Warlock* (1991), *Army of Darkness* (1992), *Puppet Master 3: Toulon's Revenge* (1991)

David Arquette *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992), *The Road Flower* (1994), *Scream* (1996), *Scream 2* (1997), *Ravenous* (1999)

Patricia Arquette *Lost Highway* (1997), *Nightwatch* (1998), *Stigmata* (1999)

Kevin Bacon *Flatliners* (1990), *Tremors* (1990), *The River Wild* (1993), *Stir of Echoes* (1999)

Daniel Von Bargen *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Lord of Illusions* (1995), *The Faculty* (1998)

Drew Barrymore *Poison Ivy* (1992), *Waxwork II: Lost in Time* (1992), *Scream* (1996)

Josh Brolin *The Road Flower* (1994), *Mimic* (1998), *Nightwatch* (1998)

Bruce Campbell *Maniac Cop 2* (1990), *Sundown: The Vampire in Retreat* (1991), *Army of Darkness* (1992), *Waxwork II: Lost in Time* (1992), *From Dusk Till Dawn 2: Texas Blood Money* (1999)

Neve Campbell *The Craft* (1996), *Scream* (1996), *Scream 2* (1997)

Jeffrey Combs *Bride of Re-Animator* (1990), *Lurking Fear* (1994), *Castle Freak* (1995), *Necronomicon: Book of the Dead* (1996), *The Frighteners* (1996), *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer* (1998), *The House on Haunted Hill* (1999)

Jamie Lee Curtis *Blue Steel* (1990), *Mother's Boys* (1994), *Halloween H20* (1998), *Virus* (1999)

Robert De Niro *Cape Fear* (1991), *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994), *The Fan* (1996)

Brad Dourif *Child's Play 2: Chucky's Back* (1990), *The Exorcist III* (1990), *Grim Prairie Tales* (1990), *Graveyard Shift* (1990), *Child's Play 3: Look Who's Stalking* (1991), *Dario Argento's Trauma* (1994), *Alien Resurrection* (1997), *Bride of Chucky* (1998), *Nightwatch* (1998)

Robert Englund *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (1991), *Night Terrors* (1991), *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994), *The Mangler* (1995), *Wes Craven Presents Wishmaster* (1997), *Urban Legend* (1998)

George Buck Flower *Blood Games* (1990), *976-Evil 2* (1991), *Waxwork II: Lost in Time* (1991), *Warlock: The Armageddon* (1993), *Castle Freak* (1995), *Village of the Damned* (1995)

Bridget Fonda *Frankenstein Unbound* (1990), *Army of Darkness* (1991), *Single White Female* (1991), *Lake Placid* (1999)

Edward Furlong *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), *Pet Semetary 2* (1992), *Brainscan* (1993)

Zach Galligan *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* (1990), *Waxwork II: Lost in Time* (1991), *Warlock: The Armageddon* (1993)

Jeff Goldblum *Mr. Frost* (1990), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Hideaway* (1995), *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997)

Lance Henriksen *Alien3* (1992), *Jennifer 8* (1992), *Man's Best Friend* (1993), *Mind Ripper* (1995)

William Hickey *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* (1990), *The Runestone* (1992), *Knocking on Death's Door* (1999)

Kane Hodder *Alligator 2: The Mutation* (1991), *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* (1993), *Pumpkinhead II: Blood Wings* (1994), *Wes Craven Presents Wishmaster* (1997), *Children of the Corn V: Fields of Terror* (1998)

Clint Howard *Carnosaur* (1993), *The Ice Cream Man* (1995), *Skeeter* (1996)

Joshua Jackson *Scream 2* (1997), *Apt Pupil* (1998), *Urban Legend* (1998)

Samuel L. Jackson *Def by Temptation* (1991), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Sphere* (1998), *Deep Blue Sea* (1999)

Famke Janssen *Lord of Illusions* (1995), *Deep Rising* (1998), *The Faculty* (1998), *The House on Haunted Hill* (1999)

Ted Levine *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *The Mangler* (1995), *Switchback* (1997)

Richard Lynch *Alligator 2: The Mutation* (1991), *Puppet Master 3:*

Toulon's Revenge (1991), *Necronomicon: Book of the Dead* (1996)

Julianne Moore *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* (1990), *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992), *The Lost World: Jurassic Park 2* (1997), *Psycho* (1998)

Viggo Mortensen *Leatherface* (1990), *The Reflecting Skin* (1991), *The Prophecy* (1995), *Psycho* (1998)

Patrick Muldoon *Wicked* (1998), *The Second Arrival* (1999), *Stigmata* (1999)

Sam Neill *Jurassic Park* (1992), *In The Mouth of Madness* (1994), *Event Horizon* (1997), *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* (1997)

Kevin J. O'Connor *Lord of Illusions* (1995), *Virtuosity* (1995), *Deep Rising* (1998)

Leland Orser *Se7en* (1995), *Alien Resurrection* (1997), *The Bone Collector* (1999), *Resurrection* (1999)

Robert Patrick *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), *Fire in the Sky* (1993), *The Faculty* (1998), *From Dusk Till Dawn 2: Texas Blood Money* (1999)

Ron Perlman *Cronos* (1992), *Sleepwalkers* (1992), *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1996), *Alien Resurrection* (1997)

Mitch Pileggi *Basic Instinct* (1992), *A Vampire in Brooklyn* (1995), *The X-Files: Fight the Future* (1998)

Brad Pitt *Kalifornia* (1993), *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), *Se7en* (1995)

Oliver Platt *Flatliners* (1990), *The Temp* (1993), *Lake Placid* (1999)

Peter Postlethwaite *Alien3* (1992), *Split Second* (1992), *Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997)

Aidan Quinn *Blink* (1994), *Mary Shelley's Frank -enstein* (1994), *Haunted* (1996), *In Dreams* (1999)

Julia Roberts *Flatliners* (1990), *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991), *Mary Reilly* (1996)

Andrew Robinson *Child's Play 3* (1991), *Pumpkinhead II: Blood Wings* (1994), *The Puppet Masters* (1994)

William Sadler *Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight* (1995), *Tales from the Crypt: Bordello of Blood* (1997), *Disturbing Behavior* (1998)

Julian Sands *Arachnophobia* (1990), *Warlock* (1991), *Warlock: The Armageddon* (1993)

Liev Schreiber *Scream* (1996), *Scream 2* (1997), *Phantoms* (1998), *Sphere* (1998)

Angus Scrimm *Subspecies* (1991), *Phantasm III: Lord of the Dead* (1994), *Phantasm IV: Oblivion* (1998)

Sharon Stone *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Diabolique* (1996), *Sphere* (1998)

Donald Sutherland *The Puppet Masters* (1994), *Outbreak* (1995), *Fallen* (1998), *Virus* (1999)

Kiefer Sutherland *Flatliners* (1990), *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1991), *The Vanishing* (1993)

Christine Taylor *Night of the Demons 2* (1994), *The Craft* (1996), *Campfire Tales* (1997)

Tony Todd *Night of the Living Dead* (1990), *Candyman* (1992), *Candyman 2: Farewell to the Flesh* (1995), *Wes Craven Presents Wishmaster* (1997), *Candyman 3: Day of the Dead* (1999)

Skeet Ulrich *The Craft* (1996), *Scream* (1996), *Scream 2* (1997)

Jan-Michael Vincent *X-tro 2: The Second Encounter* (1991), *Haunting Fear* (1991), *The Ice Cream Man* (1995)

Christopher Walken *The Addiction* (1995), *The Prophecy* (1995), *The Prophecy 2* (1998), *Sleepy Hollow* (1999)

Dee Wallace-Stone *Alligator 2: The Mutation* (1991), *Popcorn* (1991), *The Frighteners* (1996)

David Warner *The Ice Cream Man* (1995), *In the Mouth of Madness* (1995), *Necronomicon: The Book of the Dead* (1996), *Scream 2* (1997)

Sigourney Weaver *Alien3* (1992), *Copycat* (1995), *Alien Resurrection* (1997), *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* (1997)

Appendix C:

Memorable Ad Lines

With horror movies boasting bigger budgets than ever before, the marketing of genre films in the 1990s became something of great importance. Snappy "tag lines" or "ad lines" were the order of the day, in hopes of getting more warm bodies in theater seats (especially with competition from at-home distractions like the Internet, and more advanced video games)

Below is a chronology (1990 to 1999) of some of the most memorable

"You'll be in perfect health before you die."— *The Ambulance* (1990)

"Eight legs, two fangs and an attitude."— *Arachnophobia* (1990)

"We're gonna need a bigger basket!"— *Basket Case 2* (1990)

"If Jake can't fix it ... it's been dead too long."— *Blood Salvage* (1990)

"For a rookie cop, there's one thing more dangerous than uncovering a killer's fantasy. Becoming it."— *Blue Steel* (1990)

"From the writer of the original "Twilight Zone" comes the most terrifying film of the decade."— *Brain Dead* (1990)

"Date. Mate. Re-animate."— *Bride of Re-Animator* (1990)

"Look out Jack! Chucky's back!"— *Child's Play 2* (1990)

"Do you dare walk these steps again?"— *The Exorcist III* (1990)

"Satan has created the perfect killer. One who cannot be stopped. Be warned"— *The First Power* (1990)

"Some lines shouldn't be crossed."— *Flatliners* (1990)

"You will believe."— *Ghost* (1990)

"Stephen King took you to the edge with *The Shining* and *Pet Sematary*. This time ... he pushes you over."— *Graveyard Shift* (1990)

"Here they grow again." *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* (1990)

"Hit the trail ... to terror."— *Grim Prairie Tales* (1990)

"Tonight, while the world is asleep ... an ancient evil is about to awaken."— *The Guardian* (1990)

"In the 21st century there will be a new endangered species ... man."— *Hardware* (1990)

"The most frightening thing about Jacob Singer's nightmare is that he isn't dreaming."— *Jacob's Ladder* (1990)

"He puts the teeth in terror." *Leatherface: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 3* (1990)

"You Have the Right to Remain Silent ... Forever!"— *Maniac Cop 2* (1990)

"Paul Sheldon used to write for a living. Now, he's writing to stay

alive."— *Misery* (1990)

"Come meet the dead of night."— *Nightbreed* (1990)

"The Perfect House. The Perfect Tenant. Perfectly angerous."— *Pacific Heights* (1990)

"Silent. Invisible. Invincible. He's in town with a few days to kill."— *Predator 2* (1990)

"Alex thinks he's died and gone to heaven. He's half right."— *Prom Night 3: The Last Kiss* (1990)

"The world's most aggressive primate just got mad."— *Shakma* (1990)

"Four Ghoulish Fables in One Modern Nightmare."— *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* (1990)

"They say there's nothing new under the sun. But under the ground..."— *Tremors* (1990)

"The balance of nature has been tipped ... to terror."— *Alligator 2: The Mutation* (1991)

"Where does evil live, the heart, the mind or the flesh?"— *Body Parts* (1991)

"Sam Bowden has always provided for his family's future. But the past is coming back to haunt them."— *Cape Fear* (1991)

"Look who's stalking!"— *Child's Play 3* (1991)

"You Are What They Eat."— *Critters 3* (1991)

"How many times can you die for love?"— *Dead Again* (1991)

"They gave her looks. Brains. Nuclear capabilities. Everything but an "off " switch."— *Eve of Destruction* (1991)

"They saved the best for last."— *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (1991)

"In every neighborhood there is one house that adults whisper about and children cross the street to avoid."— *The People Under the Stairs* (1991)

"When good puppets go bad."— *Puppet Masters 3: Toulon's Revenge* (1991)

"This time, Satan Returns the call."— *976-Evil 2* (1991)

"Buy a bag. Go home in a box."— *Popcorn* (1991)

"To enter the mind of a killer she must challenge the mind of a madman."— *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991)

"She is a stranger in a small town. She changed her name. Her looks. Her life. All to escape the most dangerous man she's ever met. Her husband."— *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991)

"This time there are two."— *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991)

"He's come from the past to destroy the future."— *Warlock* (1991)

"Part Alien. Part Predator. All Terror."— *X-tro 2: The Second Encounter* (1991)

"This time it's hiding in the most terrifying place of all."— *Alien³* (1992)

"3 times the suspense. 3 times the danger. 3 times the terror."— *Alien*³ (1992)

"Trapped in time. Surrounded by evil. Low on gas."— *Army of Darkness* (1992)

"An Interactive Trip To Hell."— *Brainscan* (1992)

"Love Never Dies."— *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992)

"Homework. Cheerleading practice. Killing vampires. No one said high school would be easy."— *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1992)

"We Dare You To Say His Name Five Times!"— *Candyman* (1992)

"The Doctor is out ... of his mind."— *Dr. Giggles* (1992)

"Return to the Nightmare"— *Gate 2* (1992)

"...is the hand that rules the world."— *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle* (1992)

"What began in Hell, will end on Earth."— *Hellraiser 3: Hell on Earth* (1992)

"If there's one thing worse than dying and going to Hell, it's not dying —and going to Hell."— *Highway to Hell* (1992)

"Where the toll is your soul."— *Highway to Hell* (1992)

"The movie that goes straight for the jugular."— *Innocent Blood* (1992)

"God made him simple. Science made him a god."— *The Lawnmower*

Man (1992)

"Buy now. Pay later."— *Needful Things* (1992)

"Raise some hell."— *Pet Sematary II* (1992)

"De Mented, De Ranged, De Ceptive, De Palma."— *Raising Cain* (1992)

"How do you lock the terror out ... when you already invited it in?"— *Single White Female* (1992)

"The first Stephen King story written expressly for the creen."— *Sleepwalkers* (1992)

"He's seen the future.... Now he has to kill it. He'll need bigger guns."— *Split Second* (1992)

"In a town like Twin Peaks, no one is innocent."— *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992)

"A killer is waiting.... In the past, present and future."— *Waxwork 2: Lost in Time* (1992)

"Driven to extinction. Back for revenge."— *Carnosaur* (1993)

"These children are home alone, too. But their parents won't be coming back."— *Children of the Corn II: The Final Sacrifice* (1993)

"He was 28. She was 14. He was the man of her dreams. She was his worst nightmare."— *The Crush* (1993)

"Serious writer or serial killer? George is of two minds."— *The Dark Half* (1993)

"Alien abduction. November 5, 1975. White Mountains, Northeastern Arizona. Based on the true story."— *Fire in the Sky* (1993)

"Plug in to your worst nightmare."— *Ghost in the Machine* (1993)

"Evil has many faces."— *The Good Son* (1993)

"An Adventure 65 Million Years In The Making."— *Jurassic Park* (1993)

"A state of fear and terror."— *Kalifornia* (1993)

"She's To Die For."— *Return of the Living Dead III* (1993)

"Don't get mad. Get promoted."— *The Temp* (1993)

"If someone you loved mysteriously vanished how far out of your mind would you go to find them?"— *The Vanishing* (1993)

"When he comes ... all Hell breaks loose!"— *Warlock: The Armageddon* (1993)

"Imagine ... you're gone and someone else is living inside your body." *Body Snatchers* (1994)

"Drink From Me And Live Forever."— *Interview with the Vampire* (1994)

"It's Alive."— *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994)

"She left them three years ago. Now she's coming back.... Whether they like it or not."— *Mother's Boys* (1993)

"They couldn't leave dead enough alone."— *Pumpkinhead 2: Blood*

Wings (1994)

"This time the terror doesn't stop at the screen."— *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994)

"The Animal Is Out."— *Wolf* (1994)

"The dark is their sunlight. What makes them different is what keeps them alive."— *The Addiction* (1995)

"Dare you say his name 5 times ... again!"— *Candyman 2: Farewell to the Flesh* (1995)

"Hatch Harrison was pronounced dead on arrival. After two hours, the doctors brought him back. But he didn't come back alone."— *Hideaway* (1995)

"Lived Any Good Books Lately?"— *In The Mouth of Madness* (1995)

"Prepare for the coming."— *Lord of Illusions* (1995)

"From the three masters of horror, the ultimate tale of terror is about to begin."— *The Mangler* (1995)

"Try to remain calm."— *Outbreak* (1995)

"This ain't no fairy tale."— *Rumpelstiltskin* (1995)

"Seven deadly sins. Seven ways to die."— *Se7en* (1995)

"For three million years, the human race has been at the top of the evolutionary ladder. Nothing lasts forever."— *Species* (1995)

"Chill or be Chilled."— *Tales from the Hood* (1995)

"Beware the Children."— *Village of the Damned* (1995)

"The greatest danger facing our world has been the planet's best kept secret ... until now."— *The Arrival* (1996)

"Half man. Half wolf. Total terror."— *Bad Moon* (1996)

"Dead yet?" *The Frighteners* (1996)

"One night is all that stands between them and freedom. But it's going to be a hell of a night."— *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996)

"Terror never rests in peace!"— *Halloween VI: The Curse of Michael Myers* (1996)

"Through DNA experimentation Dr. Moreau has upset the balance of nature. By turning animals into humans, he's turned heaven into hell."— *Island of Dr. Moreau* (1996)

"The Battle between Good and Evil has many Victims ... and one Witness."— *Mary Reilly* (1996)

"Someone has taken their love of scary movies one step too far. Solving this mystery is going to be murder."— *Scream* (1996)

"Let the Curse fit the crime."— *Thinner* (1996)

"Witness the resurrection."— *Alien Resurrection* (1997)

"You can't scream if you can't breathe."— *Anaconda* (1997)

"Things are about to get a little hairy."— *An American Werewolf in Paris* (1997)

"The newest attorney at the world's most powerful law firm has never lost a case. But he's about to lose his soul."— *The Devil's Advocate* (1997)

"Infinite Space. Infinite Terror."— *Event Horizon* (1997)

"Something has survived."— *The Lost World: Jurassic Park 2* (1997)

"Evolution has a way of keeping things alive."— *Mimic* (1997)

"What terrifies you?" *The Relic* (1997)

"Someone has taken their love of sequels one step too far."— *Scream 2* (1997)

"I want you ... DEAD!"— *Uncle Sam* (1997)

"If you don't believe in the existence of evil, you've got a lot to learn."— *Apt Pupil* (1998)

"This ain't no pleasure cruise."— *Deep Rising* (1998)

"It doesn't matter if you're not perfect. You will be."— *Disturbing Behavior* (1998)

"The students at Herrington High always suspected their teachers were from another planet ... they were right!"— *The Faculty* (1998)

"Detective John Hobbes is searching for a criminal he's already met ... already caught ... and already killed."— *Fallen* (1998)

"Size does matter."— *Godzilla* (1998)

"20 years ago, He changed the face of Halloween. Tonight, he's back!"— *Halloween H20* (1998)

"Get hooked again."— *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer* (1998)

"What actually happened that night in the woods?"— *The Last Broadcast* (1998)

"Check in. Unpack. Relax. Take a shower."— *Psycho* (1998)

"What You Don't Believe Can Kill You."— *Urban Legend* (1998)

"How well do you know the one you love?"— *The Astronaut's Wife* (1999)

"Where can you hide?" *Bats* (1999)

"In October of 1994 three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland, while shooting a documentary.... A year later their footage was found."— *The Blair Witch Project* (1999)

"Bigger. Smarter. Faster. Meaner."— *Deep Blue Sea* (1999)

"Prepare for the end."— *End of Days* (1999)

"Some houses are born bad."— *The Haunting* (1999)

"Are you dying to be rich?"— *The House on Haunted Hill* (1999)

"You don't have to sleep to dream."— *In Dreams* (1999)

"You'll never know what bit you."— *Lake Placid* (1999)

"Every book has a life of its own."— *The Ninth Gate* (1999)

"I see dead people."— *The Sixth Sense* (1999)

"Who will it come for next?"— *Sleepy Hollow* (1999)

"The messenger is here."— *Stigmata* (1999)

"Before school lets out, Mrs. Tingle's class is going to need a substitute teacher."— *Teaching Mrs. Tingle* (1999)

"Life on Earth is in for shock."— *Virus* (1999)

Appendix D: Movie References in *Scream* (1996)

Kevin Williamson and Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996) perfected the 1990s art of the movie allusion, using references to other horror films as humor, as cultural touchstones, as plot points, and even, in one daring case, as resolution to mystery. The film is loaded with direct references (films actually mentioned by title) and contextual references involving character names, songs and situations from forebears of the genre. Below is a complete list of those references.

Title References (in order of release)

The Bad Seed (1956)

Psycho (1996)

The Exorcist (1973)

Carrie (1976)

The Town That Dreaded Sundown (1977)

Halloween (1978)

Terror Train (1980)

Friday the 13th (1980)

Friday the 13th Part 2 (1981)

The Howling (1981)

The Evil Dead (1983)

Trading Places (1983)

All the Right Moves (1984)

A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984)

Hellraiser (1987)

Silence of the Lambs (1991)

Basic Instinct (1992)

Candyman (1992)

Clerks (1994)

Mother's Boys (1994)

Situational References

The Exorcist (1973): A reporter played by a grownup Linda Blair asks a question about occult activity at Woodsboro high.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974): Randy refers to Billy as "Leatherface" the cannibal killer of Tobe Hooper's film.

Halloween (1978): Billy Loomis. Loomis refers to the name of the character in *Halloween* played by Donald Pleasence. Of course, that Loomis is a reference back to the Sam Loomis character in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960).

Halloween (1978): "Drive down to the Mackenzies."

Halloween (1978): "Don't Fear the Reaper" is played early in the John Carpenter film and early in *Scream*.

I Spit on Your Grave (1979): Tatum wonders if she's starring in a horror movie called "I Spit on Your Garage."

When a Stranger Calls (1979): A killer uses the telephone to terrorize his prey.

A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984): The heroine's boyfriend climbs through her bedroom window and is nearly caught by a single parent.

Basic Instinct (1992): Stu tells Sidney that her mother was "no Sharon Stone," and flops his hands open, like Stone's legs, as Catherine Trammell in the interrogation scene from *Basic Instinct*.

Clueless (1995): Randy refers to Stu as "Alicia," *Clueless* star Alicia Silverstone.

Appendix E: Horror Films of the 1990s vs. *The X-Files*

The horror movies released during the 1990s had the unenviable task of competing against Chris Carter's *The X-Files*, a long-lived series that excavated and re-purposed (with great wit and intelligence) just about every type of horror story known to man. In the table below, I present a 1990s horror title, and then an *X-Files* movie that handled a similar concept.

HORROR FILM OF 1990S	THE X-FILES EPISODE	CONCEPT
<i>Child's Play 2</i> (1990)	"Chinga"	killer doll
<i>The Exorcist III</i> (1990)	"Born Again"	serial killer in new body
<i>Fear</i> (1990)	"Mind's Eye"	see through eyes of killer
<i>Frankenstein Unbound</i> (1990)	"Post-Modern Prometheus"	Frankenstein
<i>Ghost</i> (1990)	"Shadows"	ghost exposes corruption
<i>The Guardian</i> (1990)	"Detour"	urban sprawl
<i>Hardware</i> (1990)	"Ghost in the Machine"	killer machines
<i>Mr. Frost</i> (1990)	"Beyond the Sea"	serial killer
<i>Predator 2</i> (1990)	"Fallen Angel"	invisible alien
<i>Dead Again</i> (1991)	"The Field Where I Died"	past life regression
<i>Silence of the Lambs</i> (1991)	"Beyond the Sea"	serial killer
<i>The Unborn</i> (1991)	"The Erlenmeyer Flask"	genetically-engineered fetus
<i>Fire in the Sky</i> (1993)	"Duane Barry"	alien abduction
<i>Ghost in the Machine</i> (1993)	"Ghost in the Machine"	killer machine
<i>The Good Son</i> (1993)	"Eve"	the bad seed
<i>Man's Best Friend</i> (1993)	"Alpha"	evil dog
<i>Wolf</i> (1994)	"Skinwalkers"	werewolf
<i>Hideaway</i> (1995)	"Born Again"	serial killer
<i>Outbreak</i> (1995)	"F. Emasculata"	disease
<i>The Prophecy</i> (1995)	"All Souls"	angels
<i>Virtuosity</i> (1995)	"First Person Shooter"	Virtual Reality
<i>The Arrival</i> (1996)	"The Beginning"	aliens
<i>The Craft</i> (1996)	"Syzygy"	witchcraft
<i>The Relic</i> (1997)	"Teso Dos Bechos"	museum, ethnic monster
<i>Death Mask</i> (1998)	"Humbug"	geeks
<i>Deep Rising</i> (1998)	"Aqua Mala"	sea monsters
<i>Disturbing Behavior</i> (1998)	"Red Museum"	teen terror
<i>The Faculty</i> (1998)	"Die Hand der Verletzt"	evil teachers
<i>The Last Broadcast</i> (1998)	"The Jersey Devil"	the Jersey Devil

Appendix F : The Ten Best Horror Films of the 1990s

In preparation for writing this book, I screened approximately three hundred horror movies. Many were great, some were good, and too many were flat-out terrible. Still, the selection of a "ten best list" is never easy, especially because in the 1990s there were so many different types of horror films produced. My final selections listed below are the horrors that best reflect the decade. They shattered conventions, and, in some cases, created new ones.

The most controversial choice here will certainly be the number one selection, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). This film is hated and derided by a good number of respectable and intelligent horror enthusiasts and writers. They feel it is more marketing ploy than movie— more gimmick than narrative. As my review of the film makes plain, I disagree. After a decade of "meta" horrors, jokey comedies and over-the-top special-effects shows, *The Blair Witch Project* successfully re-discovers horror's roots: the fear of being lost in the woods with something evil in pursuit. *The Blair Witch Project* leaves the exact nature of its terror to the imagination and yet manages to be one of the most frightening films ever made.

The Silence of the Lambs, my number two choice, may prove controversial, too, with the horror elite since many people wouldn't even consider it a horror film in the first place. Yet *The Silence of the Lambs* features one of the two monsters who replaced the slasher in 1990s horror cinema, the serial killer, and re-shapes the imperiled final girl into a professional woman and "monster" hunter. It is true that Jonathan Demme's film is more of the *Psycho* school than the supernatural school, but it undeniably gave the horror genre one of its greatest and most fearsome of modern boogeymen, Hannibal the Cannibal (Anthony Hopkins).

Kevin Williamson and Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996) is a perfect example of the 1990s self-reflexive horror film, a revival of the 1980s slasher film, only with a new gloss of cleverness, self-aware humor

and a twist to many longstanding conventions. Caustic, cruel and howlingly funny, *Scream* is a terror about the VCR generation coming of age.

Candyman is a brilliant effort to revive another format, the 1980s rubber-reality film. Here, an urban legend is brought to life by the belief of those hearing his story. *Candyman* also explicitly incorporates aspects of the race dynamic in America, giving the cinema its first black boogeyman since *Blacula*. Bernard Rose's film is smart, artistically-shot (the film's visuals practically inspire swooning) and set in a terrifying and original location, a housing project called Cabrini-Green.

The Ninth Gate is a horror film noir and received mostly negative reviews upon release. But Roman Polanski's film is a mystery wrapped in an enigma, a very personal tale of one man's vanity leading him right through the Gates of Hell.

From Dusk Till Dawn comes in at number six, and it's one of the decade's great genre blenders, a conjunction of Tarantino-esque crime movie and vampire film. It's violent, excessive, brutal and just the kick in the pants that the genre occasionally needs: a film that challenges you with what seems a sense of immorality.

At number seven and eight on the list are two films by David Fincher. He's the director who believes that "movies should scar." *Se7en* is one of the darkest, bleakest, most harrowing horrors of the serial killer persuasion ever made, set in a ruined, almost timeless city of pouring rain and lost souls. The film's final surprise, a total snuffing out of hope in our world, is one of the grimmest images ever to come from mainstream horror cinema.

The much-hated *Alien³* actually boasts some of the same virtues. It expertly undercuts every audience expectation involving sequels and pushes viewers right out of their comfort zones. Released in the year of 1992, with Ross Perot talking deficit reduction on TV, the film concerned an unpopular idea: sacrifice for the greater good. America rejected Perot and *Alien³*, but the film, in many senses, successfully carries the torch of the *Alien* saga. It is as different as its two predecessors are from each other, and just as visually accomplished. It is also, oddly, an extremely spiritual movie.

Taylor Hackford's *The Devil's Advocate* is one of the 1990s' many morality-based horrors that casts a critical eye on the tabloid and yuppie culture. It speaks in the vernacular of the day, using a trial (like the O.J. trial) as its organizing principle. Wicked and funny, *The Devil's Advocate* looks at the sin most prevalent in 1990s America: vanity.

Finally, the last title on my list is Tim Burton's *Sleepy Hollow*, a film that depicts in beautiful form the battle between science and superstition. The film remembers horror history, particularly the reign of Hammer, in its visuals, but also presents a great and memorable hero, Johnny Depp's outsider, Ichabod Crane.

In summary, the films are:

1. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999)
2. *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991)
3. *Scream* (1996)
4. *Candyman* (1992)
5. *The Ninth Gate* (1999)
6. *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996)
7. *Se7en* (1995)
8. *Alien³* (1992)
9. *The Devil's Advocate* (1997)
10. *Sleepy Hollow* (1999)

Other Four Star Horror Films of the 1990s

Gremlins 2: The New Batch (1990), *Cape Fear* (1991), *The People Under the Stairs* (1991), *The Reflecting Skin* (1991), *Spoorloos* (1991), *Dust Devil* (1992), *Raising Cain* (1992), *Single White Female* (1992), *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992), *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), *Nattevagten* (1994), *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994), *The Addiction* (1995), *Cemetery Man* (1995), *Lost Highway* (1997), *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) and *Stir of Echoes* (1999).

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Khondji, Darius (cinematographer)
Kidman, Nicole (actress)
Kilmer, Val (actor)
Kindertrauma (horror film blog)
King, Rodney
King, Stephen (author)
King Kong (1993)
Kingdom of the Spiders (film)
Kingsley, Ben (actor)
Kinkade, Amelia (actress)
Kinmont, Kathleen (actress)
Kinney, Terry (actor)
Kiss the Girls (film)
Klawans, Stuart (film critic)
Klebold, Eric (Columbine Shooter)
KNB (special effects company)
Knight, Wayne (actor)

Knocking on Death's Door (film)

Knox, Terence (actor)

Kober, Jeff (actor)

Koepp, David (writer/director)

Koontz, Dean (writer)

Koresh, David (cult leader)

Koteas, Elias (actor)

Kotto, Yaphet (actor)

Krabbe, Tim (author)

Krause, Brian (actor)

Krige, Alice (actress)

Krueger, Freddy (iconic boogeyman)

Kubrick, Stanley (director)

Kudrow, Lisa (actress)

Kurtzman, Robert (director)

Ladd, Cheryl (actress)

Ladd, Diane (actress)

Lafia, John (director)

Lake Placid (film)

Lambert, Christopher (actor)

Lambert, Mary (director)

Landis, John (director)

Lange, Jessica (actress)

Langella, Frank (actor)

Langenkamp, Heather (actress)

Langer, A.J. (actress)

La Paglia, Anthony (actor)

La Setta (film)

The Last Broadcast (film)

Last House on the Left (film)

Latham, William (film critic; author) ; reviews *Alien* ; reviews *Alien*

Resurrection ; reviews *Army of Darkness* ; reviews *The Blair Witch Project* ; reviews *Bram Stoker's Dracula* ; reviews *Bride of Chucky* ; reviews *Bride of Re-Animator* ; reviews *Candyman* ; reviews *The Dark Half* ; reviews *The Exorcist III* ; reviews *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* ; reviews *From Dusk Till Dawn* ; reviews *Halloween H* ; reviews *Halloween VI: The Curse of Michael Myers* ; reviews *Hardware* ; reviews *In the Mouth of Madness* ; reviews *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* ; reviews *John Carpenter's Vampires* ; reviews *Jurassic Park* ; reviews *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* ; reviews *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* ; reviews *Misery* ; reviews *Night of the Living Dead* ; reviews *Nightbreed* ; reviews *Phantasm IV: Oblivion* ; reviews *Predator* ; reviews *Scream* ; reviews *Seen* ; reviews *The Sixth Sense* ; reviews *Silence of the Lambs* ; reviews *Sleepy Hollow* ; reviews *Terminator : Judgment Day* ; reviews *Tremors* ; reviews *Village of the Damned* ; reviews *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*

Law, Jude (actor)

The Lawnmower Man (film)

Lea, Nicholas (actor)

Lease, Maria (writer/director)

Leatherface: Texas Chainsaw Massacre (film)

Lee, Christopher (actor)

Lee, Sheryl (actress)

Lee, Spike (director)

Leeson, Nick (rogue trader)

The Legend of Boggy Creek (film)

Leiber, Fritz (author)

Leigh, Jennifer Jason (actress)

Le May, John D. (actor)

Leonard, Brett (director)

Leonard, Joshua (actor)

Leonetti, John (cinematographer)

Leprechaun (film)

Leprechaun 2 (film)

Leprechaun 3 (film)

Leprechaun 4: In Space (film)

Let the Right One In (film)

Lethal Weapon (film)

Le Tourneau, Mary Kay

Levine, Ted (actor)

Lewinsky, Monica (intern)

Lewis, Juliette (actress)

Liapis, Peter (actor)

Licht, Daniel (composer)

Lieberman, Robert (director)

Lillard, Matthew (actor)

Limbaugh, Rush (radio talk show host)

Link (film)

Lithgow, John (actor)

L.L. Cool J (rapper/actor)

Logan, Ricky Dean (actor)

Loggia, Robert (actor)

Lom, Herbert (actor)

Lopez, Jennifer (actress)

Lord of Illusions (film)

Los Angeles Riots

Lost Highway (film)

Lost World: Jurassic Park 2 (film)

Lovecraft, H.P. (author)

Lowe, Chad (actor)

Lowell, Carey (actress)

Lugosi, Bela (actor)

Lumbly, Carl (actor)

Lurking Fear (film)

Lustig, William (director)

Luther the Geek (film)

Lynch, David (director)

Lynch, Richard (actor)

Lyne, Adrian (director)

Macht, Stephen (actor)

Macy, William (actor)

Maddrey, Joseph (film scholar) ; reviews *Body Snatchers* ; reviews *Brain Dead* ; reviews *Flatliners* ; reviews *Halloween VI: The Curse of Michael Myers* ; reviews *Jacob's Ladder* ; reviews *Leatherface* ; reviews *The Mangler* (film) ; reviews *Stir of Echoes* (film) ; reviews *A Vampire in Brooklyn* (film)

Madsen, Michael (actor)

Madsen, Virginia (actress)

Malkovich, John (actor)

Manfredini, Harry (composer)

The Mangler (film)

Maniac Cop 2 (film)

Maniac Cop 3: Badge of Silence (film)

Man's Best Friend (film)

Manson, Marilyn (singer)

Manzie, Jim (composer)

Marcoux, Ted (actor)

Marcus, Adam (director)

Marshall, Frank (producer/director)

Mary Reilly (film)

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (film)

The Masque of the Red Death (film)

Massey, Anna (actress)

Matheson, Richard (writer)

The Matrix (film)

May, Brian (composer)

Maylam, Tony (director)

Mazzello, Tim (actor)

McCallum, David (actor)

McCarthy, Kevin (actor)

McConaughey, Matthew (actor)
McCormack, Patty (actress)
McDermott, Dylan (actor)
McDonogh, Maitland (film critic)
McDowall, Roddy (actor)
McEntire, Reba (singer/actress)
McGill, Everett (actor)
McGowan, Rose (actress)
McGregor, Ewan (actor)
McKellen, Ian (actor)
McVeigh, Timothy (domestic terrorist)
Medak, Peter (director)
Meehan, Paul (author)
Men in Black (film)
Merhige, E. Elias (director)
Metcalf, Laurie (actress)
Meyer, Turi (director)
The Midwich Cuckoos (book)
Mihailoff, R.A. (actor)
Mihalka, George (director)
Milano, Alyssa (actress)
Millennium (TV series)
Miller, Dennis (actor/talk show host)
Miller, Jason (actor)
Miller, Penelope Ann (actress)
Mimic (film)
Miner, Steve (director)
Minter, Kelly Jo (actress)
Mirren, Helen (actress)
Misery (film)
Mr. Frost (film)
Modine, Matthew (actor)

Molina, Alfred (actor)

Monkey Shines (film)

Moore, Demi (actress)

Moore, Julianne (actress)

Morehead, John (horror critic) reviews *The Craft* reviews *The Devil's Advocate* reviews *Flatliners* ; reviews *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* reviews *Mimic* reviews *The Ninth Gate* reviews *The Sixth Sense* reviews *Sleepy Hollow* reviews *Terminator : Judgment Day*

Morricone, Ennio (composer)

Mortenson, Viggo (actor)

Morton, Joe (actor)

Moseley, Bill (actor)

Mostow, Jonathan (director)

Motel Hell (film)

Mother's Boys (film)

Mulcahy, Russell (director)

Mulroney, Dylan (actor)

Murphy, Eddie (actor)

Myers, Michael (iconic boogeyman)

Myrick, Daniel (director)

Mystery Science Theater (TV series)

NAFTA (trade agreement)

Natural Born Killers (film)

Necronomicon: Book of the Dead (film)

Needful Things (film)

Neeson, Liam

Neill, Sam (actor)

Nelson, Ed (actor)

Netherworld (film)

Newman, David (composer)

Newman, Kim (film critic)

Nichols, Mike (director)

Nicholson, Jack (actor)
Nicolau, Ted (director)
The Night Flier (film)
Night of the Demons 2 (film)
Night of the Demons 3 (film)
Night of the Living Dead (1968 film)
Night of the Living Dead (1990 film) *Night Shift* (literary anthology)
Night Terrors (film)
Nightbreed (film)
A Nightmare on Elm Street (film)
Nightmares in Red, White and Blue: The Evolution of the American Horror Film (book)
Nightwatch (American remake,)
Nightwatch (*Nattevagten*; original film;) *-Evil* (film)
The Ninth Gate (film)
Nixon, Richard (president)
Nolte, Nick (actor)
Norrington, Stephen (director)
Northern Exposure (TV series)
Noyce, Phillip (director)

O'Bannon, Dan (writer/director)
O'Bannon, Rockne (director)
Obrow, Jim (director)
O'Connor, Kevin J. (actor)
O'Connor, Sinead (singer)
Oklahoma City Bombing
Oldman, Gary (actor)
Olin, Lena (actress)
Oliver, Ron (director)
The Omen (film)
Orser, Leland (actor)

Osment, Haley Joel (actor)

O'Toole, Peter (actor)

Outbreak (film)

Pacific Heights (film)

Pacino, Al (actor)

Palminteri, Chazz (actor)

Paltrow, Gwyneth (actress)

Pare, Michael (actor)

Parillaud, Anne (actress)

Passion of Joan of Arc (film)

Patrick, Robert (actor)

Paxton, Bill (actor)

Pearce, Guy (actor)

Peeping Tom (film)

Pena, Elizabeth (actress)

The People Under the Stairs (film)

Perlman, Ron (actor)

Perot, Ross

Perry, Luke (actor)

Pet Sematary (film)

Pet Sematary 2 (film)

Peterson, William (actor)

Peterson, Wolfgang (director)

Pfarrer, Chuck (writer)

Phantasm (film)

Phantasm II (film)

Phantasm III: Lord of the Dead (film)

Phantasm IV: Oblivion (film)

Phantoms (film)

Pheiffer, Michelle (actress)

Phillipe, Ryan (actor)

Phillips, Lou Diamond (actor)
Phoenix Lights (UFO phenomenon)
Picardo, Robert (actor)
Pileggi, Mitch (actor)
Pinhead (horror icon)
Pinkett, Jada (actress)
Pinocchio's Revenge (film)
Pirandello, Luigi (writer)
Pitt, Brad (actor)
Pittmann, Randy (film critic)
Platt, Oliver (actor)
Pleasence, Donald (actor)
Plummer, Amanda (actress)
Poe, Edgar Allan (author)
Poison Ivy (film)
Poison Ivy: The New Seduction (film)
Poison Ivy II: Lily (film)
Polanski, Roman (director)
Poledouris, Basil (composer)
police procedural (cliché)
political correctness
Popcorn (film)
Postlethwaite, Pete (actor)
Practical Magic (film)
Predator 2 (film)
Pressley, Jaime (actress)
Preston, Cyndy (actress)
Preston, Richard (author)
Pretty Woman (film)
Prince of Darkness (film)
Prinze, Freddie, Jr. (actor)
Prochnow, Jurgen (actor)

Prom Night 3: The Last Kiss (film)
Prom Night 4: Deliver Us from Evil (film)
The Prophecy (film)
The Prophecy 2 (film)
Proskey, Robert (actor)
Psycho (film; 1960)
Psycho (film; 1998)
Psycho Sisters (film)
Pullman, Bill
Pulp Fiction (film)
Pumpkinhead (film)
Pumpkinhead 2: Blood Wings (film)
Puppet Master 2 (film)
Puppet Master 3: Toulon's Revenge (film)
Puppet Master 4: The Demon (film)
Puppet Master 5: The Final Chapter (film)
The Puppet Masters (film)

Q: The Winged Serpent (film)
Quayle, Dan (vice president)
Queen Latifah (rapper/actress)
Quigley, Linnea (actress)
Quinlan, Kathleen (actress)
Quinn, Aidan (actor)
Quinn, Glenn (actor)

Rabbet, Catherine (actress)
race related horror movies
The Rage: Carrie (film)
Railsback, Steve (actor)
Raimi, Sam (director)
Raising Cain (film)

Rambo: First Blood Part II (film)
Ramsey, Jon Benet
Randel, Tony (director)
Ravenous (film)
Ravich, Rand (director)
Ray, Fred Olen (director)
Reagan, Ronald (U.S. president)
Red, Eric (director)
Reeve, Christopher (actor)
Reeves, Keanu (actor)
The Reflecting Skin (film)
Reiner, Rob (director)
Relative Fear (film)
The Relic (film) remakes
Remar, James (actor)
Renfro, Brad (actor)
The Resurrected (film)
Resurrection (film)
Retro Puppet Master (film)
Return of the Living Dead (film)
Return of the Living Dead Part (film)
Revell, Graeme (composer)
Rhames, Ving (actor)
Rhodes, Jennifer (actress)
Ricci, Christina (actress)
Rice, Anne (author)
Ridley, Philip (director)
The Ring (American film remake; 2002)
Ringu (Japanese film)
Rissi, Michael (director)
The River Wild (film)
Rivera, Geraldo (TV talk show host)

Road rage
Roadflower (film)
Robak, Alain (director)
Robbins, Tim (actor)
Robert, Vince (director)
Roberts, Eric (actor)
Roberts, Julia (actress)
Robertson, Pat (televangelist)
Robie, Wendy (actress)
Robinson, Andrew (actor)
Robinson, J. Peter (composer)
Robison, Bruce (director)
Rodriguez, Robert (director)
Rolfe, Guy (actor)
Romero, George A. (director)
Rooker, Michael (actor)
Roos, Don (writer)
Rose, Bernard (director)
Rose, Deborah
Rose, James (horror scholar)
Rosemary's Baby (film)
Rosenberg, Tanya (director)
Ross, Chelcie (actor)
Roswell (TV series)
Rowan, Kelly (actress)
Rozen, Leah (film critic)
Rubber Reality (genre convention)
Ruben, Katt Shea (director)
Rubin, Bruce Joel (writer)
Rubin, Jennifer (actress)
Rumpelstiltskin (film)
The Runestone (film)

Rush, Geoffrey (actor)
Russell, Kurt (actor)
Russo, John A. (writer)
Russo, Rene (actress)
Ryder, Winona (actress)

Sadler, William (actor)
Sanchez, Eduardo (director)
The Sandman (film)
Sands, Julian (actor)
Sarandon, Chris (actor)
Savage, John (actor)
Savini, Tom (special effects artist, director)
Savlov, Marc (film critic)
Saw (film)
Saxon, John (actor)
Schiavelli, Vincent (actor)
Schilling, Vivian (actress/writer)
Schlesinger, John
Schmoeller, David (director)
Schoelen, Jill (actress)
Schreiber, Live (actor)
Schroeder, Barbet (director)
Schumacher, Joel (director)
Schwarzenegger, Arnold (actor)
"Science Run Amok" (s horror trend)
Sciorria, Annabella (actress)
Scorsese, Martin (director)
Scott, George C. (actor)
Scott, Ridley (director)
Scott, Tom Everett (actor)
Scott, Tony (director)

Scream (film)
Scream 2 (film)
Scream 3 (film)
Scream 4 (film)
Screamers (film)
Scrimm, Angus (actor)
Seagrove, Jennifer (actress)
The Second Arrival (film)
Seinfeld (TV sitcom)
Selena (pop star)
Seles, Monica (tennis star)
serial killer (s boogeyman)
Serra, Dominic (director)
Servants of Twilight (film)
Setbon, Philip (director)
La Setta (film)
Seen (film)
Severance, Joan (actress)
Shakma (film)
Shapiro, Alan (director)
Shatner, Melanie (actress)
Shatner, William (actor)
Shaver, Helen (actress)
The Shawshank Redemption (film)
Sheedy, Ally (actress)
Sheen, Charlie (actor)
Sheets, Todd (director)
Sheffer, Craig (actor)
Shelley, Mary (author)
Shepard, Matthew
Shikoku (film)
The Shining (film)

The Shivers (film)
Shore, Howard (composer)
Shyamalan, M. Night (director)
The Silence of the Lambs (film)
Silver, Ron (actor)
Silverstone, Alicia (actress)
Silvestri, Alan (composer)
Simon, Adam (director)
Simoneau, Yves (director)
Simply Irresistible (film)
Simpson, O.J. (murder suspect)
Singer, Bryan (director)
Singer, Lori (actress)
Single White Female (film)
Sirtis, Marina (actress)
Sissel, Sandi (cinematographer)
Sister Souljah (rapper)
The Sixth Sense (film)
Sizemore, Tom (actor)
Skal, David (horror scholar)
Skeeter (film)
Skerritt, Tom (actor)
Skogland, Kari (director)
The Slasher Revival (s subgenre)
Slater, Christian (actor)
Sleeping with the Enemy (film)
Sleepstalker: The Sandman's Last Rites (film)
Sleepwalkers (film)
Sleepy Hollow (film)
Sluizer, George (director)
Smith, Kevin (director)
Smith, Kurtwood (actor)

Smith, T. Ryder (actor)

Snipes, Wesley (actor)

Snow, Mark (composer)

Snow White: A Tale of Terror (film)

Soavi, Michele (director)

Solaris (film)

Solomon, Brian (horror critic and blogger) ; reviews *Alien* reviews *Alien Resurrection* reviews *Army of Darkness* ; reviews *The Blair Witch Project* reviews *Bram Stoker's Dracula* reviews *Cape Fear* ; reviews *Cemetery Man* reviews *Copycat* reviews *The Craft* reviews *The Dark Half* reviews *Dead Alive* reviews *The Exorcist III* reviews *Eyes Wide Shut* reviews *The Fan* reviews *From Dusk Till Dawn* reviews *Godzilla* reviews *Gremlins* reviews *The Guardian* reviews *Halloween H* reviews *Hellraiser III: Hell on Earth* reviews *Hellraiser IV: Bloodlines* reviews *Interview with the Vampire* reviews *Island of Dr. Moreau* reviews *Jacob's Ladder* reviews *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday* reviews *Jurassic Park* reviews *The Lawnmower Man* reviews *Leatherface* reviews *The Mangler* reviews *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* reviews *Mimic* reviews *Misery* reviews *Night of the Living Dead* reviews *Nightbreed* reviews *The People Under the Stairs* reviews *Return of the Living Dead III* reviews *Ringu* reviews *Seen* reviews *Silence of the Lambs* reviews *The Sixth Sense* reviews *Sleepy Hollow* reviews *Species* reviews *Tales from the Darkside: The Movie* reviews *Terminator : Judgment Day* reviews *Village of the Damned* reviews *Wolf*

Sommers, Stephen (director)

Sorceress (film)

Sorority House Massacre (film)

Sorvino, Mira (actress)

Soultaker (film)

Soutendjik, Renee (actress)

Spacey, Kevin (actor)

Spader, James (actor)

Spears, Britney (pop star)

Species (film) ***Species*** (film)

Spence, Greg (director)

Sphere (film)

Spiegel, Scott (director)
Spielberg, Steven (director)
Split Second (film)
Spoorloos (film)
Spur Posse
Stanley, John (horror critic)
Stanley, Richard (director)
Star Trek (TV series)
Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country (film)
Star Trek: The Next Generation (TV series)
Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace (film)
Starr, Kenneth (Independent Counsel)
Stay Awake shot (genre convention)
The Stendahl Syndrome (film)
The Stepford Wives (film)
Sternhagen, Frances (actress)
Sterritt, David (film critic)
Stevens, Brinke (actress)
Stigmata (film)
Stiles, Julia (actress)
Stir of Echoes (film)
Stoker, Bram (author)
Stoltz, Eric (actor)
Stone, Oliver (producer/director)
Stone, Sharon (actress)
Stowe, Madelaine (actress)
Streep, Meryl (actress)
Streiber, Whitley (author)
Strick, Wesley (writer)
Struycken, Carel (actor)
Stuart, Jeb (director)
The Stuff (film)

Subspecies (film)

Subspecies (film)

Subspecies : Bloodlust (film)

Subspecies : Bloodstorm (film)

Sundown: The Vampire in Retreat (film)

Survival of the Dead (film)

Sutherland, Donald (actor)

Sutherland, Kiefer (actor)

Swanson, Kim (actress)

Swayze, Patrick (actor)

Sweeney, D.B. (actor)

Switchback (film)

Sydow, Max Von (actor)

tabloid culture of the1990s

Tailhook Scandal

Takacs, Tibor (director)

Talalay, Rachel (director)

Tales from the Crypt (TV series)

Tales from the Crypt: Bordello of Blood (film)

Tales from the Crypt: Demon Knight (film)

Tales from the Darkside (TV series)

Tales from the Darkside: The Movie (film)

Tales from the Hood (film)

Tallman, Patricia (actress)

Tally, Ted (writer)

Tapert, Robert (producer)

Tarantino, Quentin (director; horror fan)

Taylor, Christine (actress)

Taylor, Lili (actress)

Teaching Mrs. Tingle (film)

teen culture of the1990s

The Temp (film)

The Terminator (film)

The Terminator 2: Judgment Day (film)

Terry, John (actor)

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (film;)

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre Part 2 (film)

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation (film)

Theron, Charlize (actress)

Thinner (film)

Thomas, Clarence (Supreme Court Justice)

Thomas, Kevin (film critic)

Thompson, Emma (actress)

Thornbury, Bill (actor)

Thurman, Uma (actress)

Tilly, Jennifer (actress)

Tilly, Meg (actress)

The Time Tunnel (TV series)

Titanic (film)

To Sleep with a Vampire (film)

Todd, Tony (actor)

Toppmann, Lawrence (film critic)

Towles, Tom (actor)

Travis, Nancy (actress)

Travis, Stacey (actress)

Tremors (film)

Tremors 2: After Shocks (film)

Tremors 3: Back to Perfection

Tremors 4: The Legend Begins

Trenchard-Smith, Brian (director)

Trilling, Zoe (actress)

Tripp, Linda

Tripp, Louis (actor)

Tripplehorn, Jeanne (actress)

Troll 2 (film)

True, Rachel (actress)

Trump, Donald (tycoon)

Tunney, Robin (actress)

Turner, Janine (actress)

Turner, Ted (tycoon)

Twain, Mark (author)

Twilight (film)

The Twilight Zone (TV series)

Twin Peaks (TV series)

Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me (film)

Two Evil Eyes (film)

Twohy, David (film)

Tyson, Mike

The Ugly (film)

Ulrich, Skeet (actor)

The Unborn (film)

The Unborn (film)

Uncle Sam (film)

Underwood, Ron (director)

The Unnamable

The Unnamable II: The Statement of Randolph Carter (film)

Urban Legend (film)

V-chip (technology)

Valentine, Scott (actor)

A Vampire in Brooklyn (film)

Vampire Journals (film)

vampires (s horror film trend)

Van Hentenryck, Kevin (actor)

The Vanishing (film)
The Vanishing (film)
Van Sant, Gus (director)
Vargas, Valentina (actress)
Vaughn, Vince (actor)
Verhoeven, Paul (director)
Village of the Damned (film; original)
Village of the Damned (film; remake)
Vince, Pruitt Taylor (actor)
Vincent, Alex (actor)
Vincent, Jan Michael (actor)
virtual reality
Virtuosity (film)
Virus (film)
Voight, Jon (actor)
Voorhees, Jason (iconic boogeyman)

Waco (city)
Wagner, Natasha (actress)
Wahlberg, Mark (actor)
Walken, Christopher (actor)
Wall Street (film)
Wallace, Dee (actress)
Walsh, J.T. (actor)
Walston, Ray (actor)
Walton, Travis (UFO abductee)
Ward, Chelsea (actress)
Ward, Fred (actor)
Ward, Megan (actress)
Warlock (film)
Warlock: The Armageddon (film)
Warner, David (actor)

Washington, Denzel (actor)
Watson, Barry (actor)
Watts, Naomi (actress)
Waxwork (film)
Waxwork II: Lost in Time (film)
Weaver, Sigourney
Weber, Steven (actor)
Webster, Christopher (director)
Weldon, Michael (film scholar)
Weller, Peter (actor)
Wells, H.G. (writer)
Wes Craven Presents Carnival of Souls (film)
Wes Craven Presents Mind Ripper (film)
Wes Craven Presents Wishmaster (film)
Wes Craven's New Nightmare (film)
Whalen, Sean (actor)
Whalin, Justin (actor)
Whedon, Joss (writer)
Whitaker, Forest (actor)
Wicked (film)
Widen, Gregory (director)
Wilbur, George P. (actor)
Wilder, Douglas (governor)
Williams, Clarence III (actor)
Williams, John (composer)
Williams, Michele (actress)
Williams, Robin (actor)
Williams, Treat (actor)
Williamson, Kevin (writer/director)
Willis, Bruce (actor)
Wilson, Owen (actor)
Winston, Stan (special effects artist)

The Wisdom of Crocodiles (film)
Wishmaster : Evil Never Dies (film)
Witchboard : The Possession (film)
Witchhouse (film)
Witherspoon, Reese (actress)
Witt, Alicia (actress)
Wolf (film)
Woodruff, Tom (special effects creator)
Woods, James (actor)
Woodward, Louise (au pair)
World Trade Center Bombing
Wournos, Aileen (serial killer)
Wyndham, John (author)
Wynorski, Jim (director)
Wyss, Amanda (actress)
The X-Files (TV series)
The X-Files: Fight the Future (film)

X-tro (film)
X-tro : The Second Encounter (film)
X-tro : Watch the Skies (film)

YK
Young, Christopher (composer)
Yu, Ronnie (director)
Yuppies
Yuzna, Brian (director)

Zabriskie, Grace (actress)
Zane, Billy (actor)
Zane, Lisa (actress)
Zaza, Paul (composer)

Z'Dar, Robert (actor)

Zellweger, Renee (actress)

Zemeckis, Robert (director)

Zeta-Jones, Catherine (actress)

Zimmer, Hans (composer)

Zombi (film)

Zombie Bloodbath (film)

Zombieland (film)

zombies

Zucker, Jeff (director)